

Story by Rio Sugihara
Art by Akeno Kitahata

37°C

Thirty Seven Degrees Celsius



A Digital Manga Guild Publication







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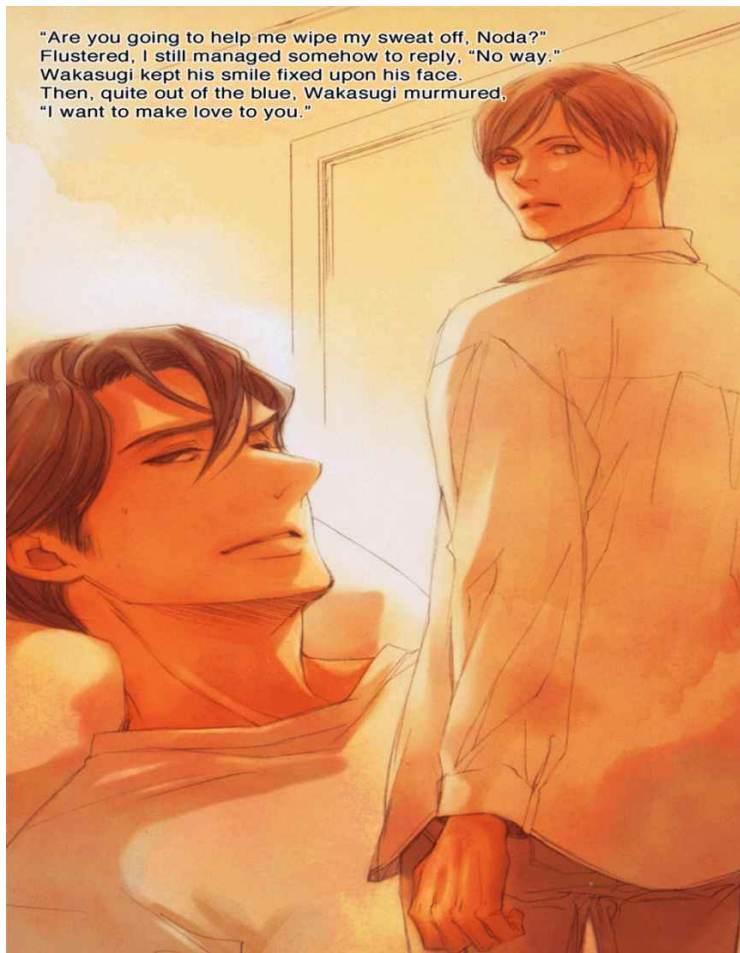
Thirty Seven Degrees Celsius

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Novel

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"Are you going to help me wipe my sweat off, Noda?"
Flustered, I still managed somehow to reply, "No way."
Wakasugi kept his smile fixed upon his face.
Then, quite out of the blue, Wakasugi murmured,
"I want to make love to you."



37°C - Thirty Seven Degrees Celsius

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Chapter I

"Noda? Long time, no see. I heard that you got divorced."

The phone call from Wakasugi was completely unexpected. My home phone has rarely rang since my wife left me. Those who want to contact me usually either call my cell phone or e-mail me. The home phone with a fax function in the living room was now merely a decorative object lightly covered with dust. So when the sound of the phone rang out suddenly, it was with a sense of trepidation that I answered as I thought it might be my wife, Naoko.

I felt a sense of great relief at my guess being completely wrong. Despite the fact the caller was the one man who could potentially cause me even more trouble than my wife, I answered somewhat cheerfully.

"Hey, good to hear your voice, too. We're not divorced officially yet, merely separated."

"Oh, sorry for jumping the gun."

Wakasugi chuckled. His voice was deep and clear. It might have gotten a touch softer over time, but the impression it made on me was exactly the same as before. I found myself trying to calculate the time that had passed.

How long has it been? I'm now 32, which means it's been exactly ten years since we graduated from college.

I'd stopped caring about my own age once I passed 30. I'd been keenly aware of it until the big 3-0, but the two years after that simply sped by.

I pictured Wakasugi's face. I only knew how he used to look as a college student. He had been tall and slim. He'd always attracted attention due to his sharply sculpted face, which made other people think that he was a child of a mixed marriage. It wasn't so much that he looked delicate and fragile; he was good looking in a quite masculine way. There was nothing more you could desire from him. "Devilishly handsome"—That would describe Wakasugi perfectly, and he was the only person that I'd ever known in real life who had genuinely fit that description. *Wakasugi failed the college entrance exam the first time he took it and so had had to wait another year to get in. He also flunked one year, so that would make him two years older than me. He should*

be 34 then.

Would a handsome man like him have managed to stay the same even into his mid-thirties? Or would he age like an ordinary person? I was trying to imagine how he'd look now at the age 34, but his image remained vague, then dissipated. His profile never became clear in my mind.

"So your wife left with your child? Or are you taking care of the kid? Either way, it must be inconvenient for you."

"We didn't have children."

"Is that right? No children, huh?"

I felt irritated by the tone of his voice, which was pregnant with implications. "Don't you have children yet?" That was one of the frequently asked questions we'd gotten. But Naoko had become sick and tired of such casual inquiries. I only found out about her feelings on the matter after she'd left. It was my fault that we didn't have any children. Our marriage had been completely devoid of sex as I hadn't been able bring myself to make love to Naoko.

At any rate, it was a mystery why Wakasugi was calling me now. There'd never been any passing small talk along the lines of "How's it going?" or anything. After a complete lack of contact spanning a period of ten years, I was beginning to wonder just what the true intentions behind his call were.

"Your call has caught me totally off-guard. What's going on? I'm still in touch with Horikoshi, though."

"Has Horikoshi said anything about me?"

"Yeah, sometimes."

That was a lie. Horikoshi and Wakasugi were close, and I'd assume that they were indeed still in touch with each other. But whenever Wakasugi's name was mentioned, I'd frown. So Horikoshi didn't say much about Wakasugi, beyond remarking with a wry smile, "You didn't like Wakasugi, did you?" I only knew that Wakasugi was now involved some which way in the theater and with performance related work.

I'm guessing that everybody thought my relationship with Wakasugi had been that of a casual friend. We'd been together often when we'd gone out drinking with a large group of mutual acquaintances, but we had very different personalities and didn't share any hobbies. Probably, nobody had ever suspected that there had been a much more personal type of relationship between us.

Regardless, I actually didn't consider Wakasugi an old buddy as such. I hardly knew him. He'd started acting while still a college student, and so didn't

seek employment with a large corporation. With that decision alone, Wakasugi had already become different from ordinary salarymen like Horikoshi and myself.

There was, however, one way in which I was intimately familiar with Wakasugi. Nobody else knew, including Horikoshi. I hadn't even really thought about it lately. That was, not until now.

"I'm homeless now. Got in a fight with my better half and ... got kicked out."

The moment Wakasugi said this, I knew what it was that he was going to ask me. I wanted to hang up the phone but found that I couldn't make myself actually do it.

"Oh, sorry to hear that. That must be a hard thing to deal with."

"I'm so relieved to hear that you don't have a kid. If you did, I wasn't gonna ask you. You know, you just built your house last year and all. I don't wanna be a bother, but can I stay with you for awhile?" I thought to myself that it was just as I'd feared, while trying to find the words to say 'no.' He called me out of the blue after ten years and had the guts to ask me this. He had no common sense at all. I could have bluntly said, "That won't be possible," but somehow I found myself hesitating.

"... You must be thinking I've got a lot of nerve, huh?"

Listening to his voice with a hint of smile, I kept remembering what Wakasugi looked like when he was a college student. I thought I'd forgotten it all, but fragments of memory came flooding back to me one after another. Each fragment was sharp and pierced the weak points within my heart.

"What else is new? I know how you are."

Wakasugi chuckled, amused by my irony. I noticed his laughter sounded the same and made up my mind.

"You can stay with me."

Wakasugi uttered, "What?" He was probably surprised to hear an affirmative response so quickly.

"Are you sure?"

As I reassured him, I'd already begun to have regrets. I feared that I might be making a huge mistake. Then again, once I saw him, perhaps I could gain some closure to those feelings that had been left in a turmoil inside me for so many, many years. I needed the confirmation that it had all just been a whim of youth. Now that we were both thirty something, perhaps we could reminisce about our past and say, "Oh yeah, I remember that," and put it all to rest.

I found myself desperately wanting to see Wakasugi now. I needed to crush

the illusions residing within my memory. After all, it's been ten years since then. How did that handsome man age? I told myself that I was simply curious.



It was the fall of our senior year. The recession didn't show any sign of abating. A cousin of mine, who'd graduated from university in the midst of the bubble years, boasted how easy it had been for him to find a job. His talk sounded like a fairy tale from some far off exotic land.

I'd somehow managed to secure a job with a financial institution in Tokyo, which was what I had wanted. I was just idling away the rest of my college days, feeling as though my life's ambition had been already accomplished. It was on a night that we all went out drinking that I first met Wakasugi. I'd gone to crash at Horikoshi's afterward. Horikoshi was a good hearted guy, one of the few of my friends that I could completely relax around. He had an easy laugh. A good-natured personality showed through eyes that always seemed to be smiling, and he was popular with the women as well.

"Another friend of mine is also staying at my place tonight. Do you mind?" Horikoshi asked me on our way to his apartment, as if trying to gauge my feelings.

"Of course not. I'm the one who's sponging off you. Well, who is it? A girl?"

"Nah. It's a friend of mine from high school. I think I've told you about him before. The really handsome guy, the one who's always sleeping around."

I had heard about Horikoshi's friend, who was disgustingly popular among the girls. He was never without a date, and would move in to his partner's place once they actually became intimate.

"Is that the guy who's like a gigolo? Why's he at your place?"

"He's not trying to rip me off or anything. He does have his own place. It's just that he can't be alone, not even for a second. He's lonely and feeling rather needy. I guess he got dumped by a girl or something so he's staying with me."

So he was a lonely lover boy, I thought to myself, amused. I'd had some girlfriends, but I couldn't picture myself being with them all the time. If a girlfriend stayed at my place for too long, I got irritated. In 20/20 hindsight, all the relationships I'd had with girls were completely superficial. I could become sexually excited around women, but it was for sheer physical diversion and not

passion. I suppose such tendencies must automatically show. There'd been several occasions in which a guy had made a pass at me. I knew I couldn't have a serious relationship with a woman, but I also couldn't admit my true sexuality to myself. From time to time, I'd felt an urge to follow my instincts, but I told myself that I knew that not everyone my age was sexually satisfied either, so I didn't have to feel sorry for myself. That it was totally unthinkable for me to consider a sexual relationship with a man, despite my lack of sex drive with women. That is, it was out of the question until the day I met Wakasugi.

We went up an external staircase to the second floor and were just about to open the door to Horikoshi's apartment, when I suddenly became aware of the night air's chill and the chirping of insects all around me. Maybe I was a bit nervous about meeting someone for the first time as normally, I failed to notice these sort of small details. Once inside, the pleasant chirping subsided and I heard low TV sounds coming from the room next to the kitchen instead.

"... Is that you, Horikoshi?" a low clear voice asked as we stepped inside.

The man, who had been lying on a bed by the wall and watching TV, noticed that Horikoshi wasn't alone and slowly sat up. He shot me a dirty look.

That was Wakasugi. With only a glance, I could tell that he had a large personal presence. His features were flawlessly chiseled. He was looking in my direction with a slight smile on his classically handsome face. Even the way he brushed his hair was picture-perfect. When someone has such perfect looks, it others feel intimidated just by being around. Wakasugi's looks were certainly on that level-that of the highest order.

"A friend came along. This is Noda, and he's sleeping over tonight."

"How do you do?" I bowed my head slightly. Wakasugi eyes narrowed in a smile.

"Hi, I'm Wakasugi."

He was so self-assured. It was one of the traits of the type of person who knew their own attractiveness. For no apparent reason, he continued to stare at me with a relentlessness that left me feeling shaken.

"You're different from Horikoshi's other friends." That was the only thing he said to me on the first day.

We stayed up for another hour or so before we calling it a night, during which Wakasugi spoke only with Horikoshi. I didn't strike up a conversation with him, either. Only, he occasionally gave me that same implacable stare. When I glanced at him, he returned my look with a calm smile. It was as if all of his beautifully smooth movements were carefully calculated. His look, full of

implications, seemed like a picture or a sculpture to me. When I see certain art pieces at a museum, I don't know what to say. Likewise, I was speechless when I looked at Wakasugi.

I fell asleep just as soon as the lights were turned off that night. It was almost dawn when I found myself unexpectedly roused from sleep as Wakasugi walked right past my head. I heard the bathroom door open and Wakasugi urinate. When the footsteps came back, they stopped right next to my head. I opened my eyes slightly to see Wakasugi peering down at me. He watched me for what seemed a very long time. I suspected that he was waiting for me to wake up and give some kind of response. I couldn't see what his expression was like in the darkness. I held my breath, until Wakasugi walked away from me and lay down in his bed quietly.



The next time that I saw Wakasugi was at my place. I'd decided to make some nabe with a few other friends. I'd invited him over because Horikoshi had asked me if it was okay to include Wakasugi. Wakasugi had a gloomy look on his handsome face, which might have been because he had a touch of cold. I'd heard that Wakasugi was involved in theater. They'd said that he was a playwright as well as an actor. As I watched him picking at the nabe with a drowsy look, I imagined him acting on stage—a stage I hadn't seen yet. Although it was only within my own imagination, I pictured him as being extremely captivating. If Wakasugi was on stage, he surely wouldn't need any special presentation. He had a unique presence and his casual glances alone would be enough to tell a story.

I had been cautious around Wakasugi ever since I first saw him in Horikoshi's room. I'd been wondering about the peculiar attitude he displayed that night. I kept asking myself, "Could it be ...?" , but I didn't want to make too much over it. While eating nabe, Wakasugi glanced at me from time to time, but never engaged me in conversation. Still, I could sense that he was keenly listening while I was talked with Horikoshi or the other guys. I occasionally felt his gaze, closely watching me. The gaze was subtle, yet hot enough to burn. While having a lively conversation with the others, I felt the mood between Wakasugi and I as something distinctly different than that among the rest of the group.

After eating nabe, Wakasugi suddenly went limp and said, "I feel unwell." He must have felt really sick because his eyes were watery. I took his temperature with a thermometer to find out that he had a low-grade fever of 37°C . I couldn't tell him to go home since he said he didn't want to move. I ended up letting him sleep in my room.

"... Are you okay?" I asked him after everyone else left. Wakasugi remained horizontal but turned to me with a vacant look.

"Looks like you're in discomfort."

Since I was out of cold medicine, I offered to go to a nearby drugstore to get some. He didn't say, "Don't bother." He got up slowly and held out his wallet instead. I took it because I thought he'd feel better if I accepted it.

When I went to pay for the cold medicine at the drugstore, I was startled to find a condom inside his wallet. It wasn't uncommon for a man to have a condom in his wallet, just in case, but I felt as though I was looking at an aspect of someone's private life and couldn't help but picture some graphic images. Frankly, I was attracted to Wakasugi. I tried to be cautious around him precisely for that reason. I had my preferences and he wasn't really my type.

Whatever your preferences, though, his flawless beauty had the power to capture your heart instantly.

I was just an ordinary guy. My fragile physique might have been a bit on the feminine side, but I wasn't particularly good-looking or anything. I gave out the impression that I was kind of quiet. People frequently commented that I was gentle and friendly, but handsome wasn't an adjective people often used to describe me. Looking into a mirror, I saw an ordinary young man. I would be lying if I said that I didn't care about my looks, but I didn't care overly about my appearance because I knew men had to pursue other things.

What I wanted to pursue was an excellence that would overwhelm others, general communication skills that would compliment such excellence, and to gain a sheer financial strength that would generate dominating power. However, I also didn't take superficial appearances lightly. I had an instinctive desire for beautiful things that might have been based on my inferiority complex. I knew I didn't have physically masculine virtues and Wakasugi's chiseled features hit me right in my weak spot.

When I returned to my room, Wakasugi was sitting up in bed. "Are you okay?" I asked. Then he finally spoke. "Yeah, I'm okay."

He sounded steadier than I'd thought he would. I brought a glass of water and the medicine to him. Wakasugi obediently took it. "The receipt is inside," I told him as I returned his wallet. When he took it back, he grinned.

"Sorry for your trouble. You're so nice."

Something about him had changed while I was out. He looked different somehow. He still looked a little flushed due to his fever, and his eyes were just as slightly watery as before, but his eyes had gained a strange glint within their depths.

"Feeling better now?"

"Yeah, a lot better."

Wakasugi looked at me with a smile. His eyes were like irresistible magnets, and I tried hard to look away.

"You must be sweaty. Shall I loan you some clothes to change into? Probably could use a towel, too." I was trying to cover my uneasiness by saying or doing something, so without waiting for a reply, I simply got up and brought him a change of clothes and a towel.

"Are you going to help me wipe my sweat off, Noda?"

Flustered, I still managed somehow to reply, "No way." Wakasugi kept his smile fixed upon his face. Then, quite out of the blue, Wakasugi murmured, "I want to make love to you."

At first, I thought I'd misheard him. Then I froze, thinking that he had read my mind because as I was getting the change of clothes ready for him, I'd also been busy imagining Wakasugi's naked body. He looked slim in his clothes, but his body turned out to be surprisingly sinuous and even with his clothes on, I could glimpse the smooth and firm skin around his collar. I was enthralled by it. I was also vulgarly curious to find out just what was inside the underwear of the man who had the beautiful looks of a movie star. My reveries must have caused me to hallucinate, I thought, so I threw the change of clothes and the towel toward the bed, avoiding him. I was just about to leave when Wakasugi quickly grabbed my arm.

"You know what I mean, don't you?"

He looked me directly in the eye. Even brightened by fever, his eyes couldn't help but captivate anyone that looked into them. Whenever a man used a pick-up line on me, I usually felt uncomfortable that my secret was so easily seen. This was another such moment and yet I couldn't take my eyes off of Wakasugi.

Wakasugi drew me closer, grabbed my chin and kissed me forcefully. It was so sudden that I didn't even think about resisting. Instead, I found myself totally absorbed in kissing him back, strongly and passionately, as if to satisfy my own deep longing and hunger. When our lips parted and our eyes met, Wakasugi smiled, seemingly surprised by my enthusiasm.

"Come over here."

I was pushed down onto the bed by my shoulders. He kissed me again and I noticed how alarmingly hot his mouth was. The heat penetrated my body and set my heart aflame.

Rutting against me violently, he came. Wakasugi then fell down onto the narrow bed, breathing so heavily that I was afraid he was going to take his last breath. All during our sexual encounter, my own hands had remained so tightly clutched to the sheets that my hands became numb and weak.

I was looking at my bruised wrists when his hand caught my arm. He kissed my arm on the softer inner side as though in gentle apology. I allowed him to do what he wanted, and then he kissed me on my lips.

"Um ..."

Between our lips, honey-like saliva came leaking out. Wakasugi acted like he didn't want to let me go. He caressed my body all over and buried his face in my chest, as if eager to have more. It was more like he wanted to lick something for comfort, rather than do any actual necking. He vigorously licked my nipples like a child might lick a lollipop. I found out for the first time that

some parts of me were tantalizingly sweet. It was if the sweetness he was tasting was spreading itself in my own mouth.

"Ah h..."

As if my moaning was a cue, his cock once more leapt from limpness to a state of full arousal. His movements became guided by his own lust, without much consideration for me. Pistoning, he would kiss me to calm me down or caress my ears upon hearing me scream but he never once stopped the motions that opened me up with wild abandonment.

The turgid length of flesh certainly belonged to him but he didn't have any control over it. He was a hot air breathing beast; that's what it felt like. His movements were wild yet rhythmic. It was straightforward and simple and I felt relieved that I could indulge his desires.

With a slight upturn to the corners of his mouth, Wakasugi excitedly began to describe where we were connected in coarse terms. I blushed and turned away. He chuckled in a low voice, his laughter tickling my ears. Sweet nothings mixed with the sounds of our sexual intercourse melted away inside of my ears. The more we did it, the less I could think. My consciousness seemed to expand beyond myself. We fell deeper into an abyss, to a place I couldn't go to by myself. The only thing left anchoring me to my own awareness was the feeling of our fingers intertwined in the darkness.

"Wakasugi left my place."

When Horikoshi told me this in the campus cafeteria, I struggled to not to show my emotions.

"He said he was going back to his place, but I guess he's really staying at someone else's."

Horikoshi was speaking casually, but the fingers holding my chopsticks were trembling.

"He's got a new partner... already?" Finding myself in a cold sweat, I was surprised to observe myself managing to act so innocently.

"Well, not very many women refuse him. The way he manages to hook up is almost supernatural. Always very quick, too. What do you think of him, Noda? Personally, I'm rather envious."

Spurred on by his laughter, I snickered and said, "Oh, I don't know." I tried to act normal, but my mouth might have been a bit stiff. Either way, I had passed the point of no return by feigning indifference. The minute I parted from Horikoshi, I felt a heavy sense of guilt sink into my chest. "I guess he's staying

at someone else's," Horikoshi had presumed and he was right. Wakasugi was at my place even as we spoke.

I went back to my apartment. I opened the door and a masculine voice called out, "Welcome home." Wakasugi was lying down, watching TV and acting like the man of the house. With that sight, the sense of guilt about deceiving Horikoshi came back.

"You left Horikoshi's place?"

"He was telling me that I needed to get out soon anyway, so it all worked out."

There was a bag, filled with Wakasugi's belongings, sat in the corner of my room.

"You have your own place, don't you?"

"You don't want me here?" he asked, sounding very confident that he already knew my answer. I found that I didn't mind.

"Hm ... I don't want you to tell Horikoshi about this. Actually ... not anyone else either."

"Okay. You're so timid, Noda. I'll even go out somewhere when you have a guest."

The notion of an affair with Wakasugi was appealing to me, so long as we could keep our relationship a secret that would never leave my rooms. The memories kept repeating like a broken record within my mind. My bruised wrists, his wild breath relentlessly burning against my skin, and the feel of his hard flesh forcing its way inside of me. After repeating themselves over and over again, these images eventually became fragments that formed a collage, deep inside my mind.

"Come over here. I've been waiting for you."

Wakasugi grabbed my arm and pulled me closer matter-of-factly. He pulled me down to the bed and climbed on top of me. No teasing chitchat, no sweet talk. The simplicity of all this felt good. Lurching backward, I got another look at Wakasugi's stuff sitting in the corner of my room. Considering the scale of his actual presence, his belongings themselves were actually rather simple. The only clothes in the bag were some well broken in jeans and a few shirts whose colors had faded from multiple washes. When Wakasugi put these simple items on, however, they became part of a beautiful picture. Keeping his stuff here wouldn't be a big deal, I thought. I didn't think that would have any lasting consequences upon my own world.

"Wakasugi, do you like men?"

"Oh yeah. I also like women, but I prefer men."

"Does Horikoshi ...?"

"He knows. I'm like an exotic creature to him. He laughed and said, 'You can do it with both men and women? Win-win situation, huh? Boy, you're so lucky.' ... You don't want Horikoshi to find out?"

"I don't want anyone to find out about us."

"Alright, I understand. It's not easy to come out."

Wakasugi spread my bare legs apart and buried his face in between.

"This time, I'll be more gentle. I was so greedy the last time. Wasn't that a little rough for you?"

I remembered his wildness and blushed. The words that came out of my mouth at the spur of the moment surprised me.

"Um ... that's alright. Be rough."

"What?"

"I ... like it like that."

I managed to say this in a faint voice, and Wakasugi gasped.

"You like it like that? You like to ... be forced?"

"Right."

I no longer knew what I was saying. I felt dizzy, almost faint.

"... You're kinky, huh? So cute."

Wakasugi kissed me really hard and his hands wildly played all over my body. He slid his finger into my ass, which was not yet used to taking a man inside, and fondled.

"Say that again. Tell me to be rough," Wakasugi demanded, lifting my chin and rubbing his hard cock against the valley between my legs.

"Please ... be ... rough. Be merciless ... Ahhh ..."

I told him what he wanted to hear. I couldn't help but moan from the sensation which then rended its way through my lower body.

I ended up asking him to be rough every time we had sex. It didn't mean anything special in the beginning. If Wakasugi simply acted on his lusts, it was wild and violent enough. Wakasugi was not only good-looking but also had a beautiful body. Lithe muscles, silky smooth skin, and the very delineation of his body was sheer perfection. His toes, his shoulder blades, the shape and size of his penis, every detail was flawless. But as the days went by, I began to beg him to be rougher and even more merciless. I didn't need any of his gentle kisses or caresses. I only wanted to be treated roughly by Wakasugi.

I often wondered why I got sexually excited by the rough play. It might

have had something to do with my upbringing. My parents were pious Christians. I myself stopped going to church around the time that I started high school, but my parents had imbued the Christian teachings within me ever since I was a very little boy. The doctrine tormented me, eating me up like some disease. I was not a good man; I never even tried to be good. I knew what it was to be virtuous and good, but I was too weak to practice goodness. At the same time, I felt terribly ashamed of myself.

"Tie me up." I requested. "That kind of play can be fun sometimes, huh?" he agreed, thinking I was merely being playful. Once we crossed that line, however, it was as if there was no tomorrow for me. Initially, only my arms were bound behind me. My desire kept escalating, so much so that soon we were using shackles, ropes that rubbed against my skin, and a sex toy with a strange shape that penetrated deep inside by design.

"Why do you like to be treated so roughly?"

Wakasugi was puzzled. I didn't think too much about it then.

"I guess I feel like I'm doing something wrong. So the harsh treatment gives me some relief. You know, like it's because I deserve it."

All men are somewhat innately sadistic. Wakasugi's desire for sadistic behaviors was probably about just about average. He didn't have a particularly strong desire and he wasn't particularly talented at it, either. Since we were young, he simply got into it with me because of the novelty. Yet, he probably really didn't want to venture all that deeply within that lifestyle. Therefore, it was me that prepared the equipment for our sadistic play and I always gave the instructions. My room wasn't anything special: an ordinary room for an ordinary college boy. The sex play equipment in my room, therefore, were like alien artifacts. When I saw those foreign objects, I was transformed into something quite distorted, as if under a spell.

"Doesn't this hurt?"

When Wakasugi asked me this, I was in a forced posture, with my legs spread apart widely, and an adult toy deeply inserted. I was quite excited, and it was obvious from the hard-on between my legs, my clipped nipples standing erect, my disheveled blushed cheeks, and the ecstasy within my eyes.

"No, it feels good. Now... please... come inside me."

Wakasugi had probably expected me to beg him to release me. Nevertheless, he responded to my request and shoved his cock in. At the same time, he stroked my thigh awkwardly. "The rope is cutting in. It'll leave an awful mark."

"It's okay. M...move around more. Ahh... uhn ... Go in deeper ... deeper

inside. More, please..."

Aroused by my encouragement, Wakasugi got into action. My tied up body might have freaked him out, but he savagely thrust in response to my begging and clinging. He came hard with an almost beast-like show force, and it was only then that he showed his pique with a mild sense of abhorrence.

"Pervert," he muttered with a dark expression, as he pulled himself away. He acted as though he was disgusted, forgetting completely about the excitement we had just shared.

I'm sure he was reluctant to do those things, which were not his predilection, but nevertheless, he continued to respond to my requests. First, out of curiosity. Then as if repulsively drawn. Once he overcame that stage, he began trying to see something just below the surface, something invisible. His eyes became clearer as he held me. What was he trying to see? What was he thinking? Since I considered our relationship only sexual, I didn't really care what Wakasugi thought. My relationship with Wakasugi didn't have any influence over my mind. I believed that Wakasugi felt the same way as during the few months we lived together, I didn't engage in much actual conversation with Wakasugi.

For instance, Wakasugi would never talk about his work in the theater with me, whereas he would ask Horikoshi to buy some tickets to his show. "Why didn't you tell me?" I asked him once. "I didn't think you'd be interested," was his response. I had to stay silent then because I couldn't deny it. I really wasn't interested in Wakasugi as a person all that much. Or, to be more precise, I tried very hard not to become interested in him.

It was after all by an accident, one triggered by a series of random chances, that Wakasugi started living at my place. Cohabitation with a man must of course eventually come to an end. Believing in that eventual fate, it seemed helpful for me not to have any personal and emotional exchanges with Wakasugi.

"Noda, your skin is so fair," he said, cleaning up after a sexual interlude one day. Wakasugi stroked my arm gently, watching my slightly sweaty skin closely. His tongue trailed over, licked the inside of my arm, and then said, "Looks delicious." He laughed mockingly.

"You like fair skin?"

"Makes it easy to leave a hickey. It's fun."

He sucked on my arm noisily.

"I like to leave my mark."

He would say, "Looks painful," about the mark left by the rope, but I

suppose hickey's were different to him. He would suck many such places upon my body relentlessly. This time though, Wakasugi simply held me from behind, nuzzling my hair. Just from his mere touch, I felt a distinct heat flow into my body. It was something quite different from the heat that I felt during sex. Then there was something melting away inside of me from the heat. This sensation was quite different and it made me feel apprehensive.

I stared at him, still in his arms. Wakasugi blinked repeatedly and traced the corner of my eye with his finger. It was like he was asking me why I was looking at him so sharply. I didn't know why I stared at him, either. It was much easier to deal with him while he was sexually excited and acted like an animal. I found it hard for me to get a handle on him otherwise.

"Wakasugi, why did you choose me?" I asked as I found myself suddenly curious. He looked uneasy.

"Why? Because you were my type," he muttered, looking slightly away.

"Most of Horikoshi's friends are crude, but you were different. The moment I heard your voice as you introduced yourself, I formed the impression that you were a clean-cut, nice sort of guy. Since I'm rather irresponsible and a little bit of a slob, I like guys who are neat and earnest."

Then he smiled a little.

"I was attracted to you because you seemed like a placid and calm guy. I had no idea that you were such a prurient masochist. You think you deserve to be treated cruelly. That's a very interesting notion, I think."

He added that he especially liked my eyes, because he thought they looked sexy. I glanced away, trying to escape from his touches about the corner of my eye. I wished he had told me that he could tell we were of the same kind. I wished he had said that we were just sex friends, that would have suited me much better.

"I never thought you liked me, Wakasugi."

He looked bewildered at my remark.



"Why do you sleep with me then, Noda?"

Even if Wakasugi had been the biggest jerk of a human being, I wouldn't have cared. I was simply sexually attracted to his appearance. There could be no other reason why. I just wanted to sleep with him. With the realization that I didn't have any clear and positive emotional reason for sleeping with Wakasugi, I felt ashamed for the first time. I began to hate the way Wakasugi would kiss me gently or sweet talk to me during sex. Maybe my sense of guilt kicked in. I would look away, refusing his gentle caresses. Wakasugi found that amusing and kissed me many more times.

"You're so adorable. I love you," he would whisper into my ears teasingly. He would harass me with tender kisses and I'd say, "Stop it." It was all part of our routine. Occasionally, Wakasugi would push me down violently, acting as if he was really pissed off. He would give me a hard stare and say, "Damn you!" Seeing Wakasugi like that pained my heart but I didn't want to think what that pang meant. If I gave it too much thought, I knew I would fall apart so I simply tried to quickly forget it while he kissed me.

Whenever we were out with a group of friends, Wakasugi and I gave no indication that we were living together. We simply acted innocently. Once back in our apartment, however, we made love to each other like we were falling into a bottomless pit. When we were outside, we stayed further apart again. The only time we were close to each other was when we engaged in breathing together, almost suffocating ourselves. The time when we were alone went by with a peculiar degree of intensity. Sometimes it felt like endlessly long while at other times, it would become bright outside before we knew it, and it felt like time was flying right by. Each time that we made love, fragments of emotion fell and scattered. Those fragments didn't have a name, didn't have a color; they only radiated a transparent light of increasing intensity. I normally fell asleep first, yet Wakasugi always woke up before I did, so I almost never got to see his sleeping face. His appearance was perfect and he was always thoroughly guarded. Although he was friendly and acted helpless at times, he kept a barrier around his heart that nobody could get through. It didn't matter if people called him a slacker. His emotional guard was up. He cuddled with people, but nobody knew what went on in his mind.

He was a noble lone wolf. I liked that about him, but Wakasugi himself didn't like that aspect of his personality and might have been struggling to change. He would take what he wanted by force sometimes. He could have

taken advantage of his charisma to be more selfish and heartless, yet, he couldn't be dry and cold. He was actually more on the opposite extreme. Wakasugi was acting in theater not only because of his narcissistic nature; I often thought he was also trying to look into his own inner self.

Horikoshi had told me that Wakasugi had his own place. I knew it was a plush condo that his parents had given him during his high school days. Nevertheless, he always crashed with his dates and never invited anyone over to his place. The reason why he didn't ask anyone to his place was because he thought that his condo was cold and full of bad omens. He was clingy while you were dating him, yet he didn't show any lingering emotions once you broke up with him.

At the year's end during the second month since we started living together, I returned home to my parents', but Wakasugi remained in our apartment. I didn't ask him why he wasn't going to his hometown. Probably to make me feel better, he told me that he'd be going away somewhere but I guessed that he was actually going to stay at our place. He could easily find somebody to spend the New Year's holiday with, but I didn't think he was going to ask anybody.

I had planned to stay at my parents' for awhile, to spend some time at leisure, but I changed my plans on the day I arrived. My parents, with their son now already promised full-time employment, were now picturing a future that saw their son getting married in a few years, and bringing up their grandchild. My parents didn't say anything about all this, but I could tell that they had no doubts about it. I felt uncomfortable and awkward. So I said, "I have plans with my friends," and left for home on New Year's Day. I felt especially uneasy about the way my mother kept giving me meaningful looks.

When I got back to our apartment around midnight, Wakasugi was there alone, just as I had pictured. There was an unfinished script for a play on the table. There were some reference books scattered about him.

"You're home early."

He didn't look surprised. It was as if he knew I would come back early. It was rather a quiet night, probably because most people in our apartment complex had returned to their hometowns. There were very few people walking around outside, and we didn't hear a sound coming from anywhere. I felt as if our apartment was isolated from the rest of the world.

"This is good," Wakasugi commented while eating the New Year's food that I had brought back in plastic containers.

"You like it?"

"Love it."

There was an awkward mood. We were talking about the ingredients for New Year's food, and flipped around the TV channels to catch some stupid New Year's special programs. Throughout all this, Wakasugi was constantly watching me. He had a gentle smile, but he was staring only at me with intensity, almost without moving his eyes. His gaze was a little frightening and I felt trapped within that gaze. When we finished eating, he made his move. I supposed that his gaze was a kind of foreplay. He suddenly grabbed my arm and whispered into my ear, "I'll do what you like to do."

I'd thought that he was tired of going along with my unusual requests, but Wakasugi was quite unusually motivated that particular night. My wrists and my ankles were bound together with shackles. These were, in a way, our ceremonial instruments. I was like a sacrifice on an altar, exposing everything while on the bed.

"Oh ... no."

"You like it, don't you?"

Being visually ravaged, my body started reacting. His deep and sweet voice brutally fanned the flames of our passion. Dirty words came pouring out of his lips as Wakasugi slowly crawled on top of me. I was watching him dreamily.

"Here ..."

He put his long, slender finger into my mouth. "Suck it," he demanded. I suckled his finger eagerly. I kept on doing it even after he put something else in my mouth, too. He was a beautiful, dominating man, and I while I didn't think that was the role he wanted, he played it perfectly nonetheless. He watched me as he unrelentingly conquered my body. His cold and oppressive stare somehow contained a twisted loving passion.

The colorlessly clear emotional fragments that always fell between us whenever we made love, now seemed to gain some hint of color. They didn't form any particular shape yet, but the shift in the fragments made me suddenly uncomfortable and I felt an impulse to escape from his arms. He fondled my body, using our strangely shaped toy. When he was through with that, he rubbed his hot prick against my groin. When he moved on top of me, he was breathing heavily like some excited beast. He also sounded a little bit mournful.

"Aargh ... Ugh!"

As he rammed his way in, I couldn't help but scream in reply to his every movement. Even after coming once, his cock didn't go limp. He bent and crushed my body, and continued on for another round. He penetrated deep and put our lips together. It was an enthusiastic kiss that felt as if he was trying to

suck my soul out through my mouth. His member was hot and throbbing, ready to explode, but his eyes held a subtle glint, as ephemeral as moonlight. His eyes were two black holes, first attracting and then swallowing me whole.

He kept kissing me, as if trying to quench his thirst. That passionate thirst was contagious. I wanted to swallow his soul, too. I kissed him back eagerly, and I felt Wakasugi's prick inside me get a lot harder and bigger. As our tongues entangled, the penetration deepened. I wanted to tell him that I knew he felt lonely. Although I didn't say it out loud, he must have sensed it because he looked a little embarrassed and started thrusting much harder.

He kept moving for a long time. When it was finally over, he tried to open my legs further apart again. I tried to escape, but he pulled me closer with a firm grip. I was forced to let him into the furthest depths. I tried to scream, "Stop!" but my cry was muffled by his kiss. After it was all over, Wakasugi clutched my head in his arms and softly kissed it repeatedly. "I love you," he whispered. I struggled in his arms, trying to get away. He was used to my routine and held me tighter with a bitter smile. The scent of sex and semen permeated the moist air. It worked like an anesthetic and I found myself stripped of any strength that I had left to resist.

"I'm so glad that you came back early," I suddenly heard him whisper into my ears, which was upsetting.

"I didn't mean ..."

"I was glad," Wakasugi repeated and his eyes did not quite obscure a glint of irritation. I didn't deny his assumption any longer. I found his touch annoying at times, probably because he knew me so well. Wakasugi had a clear view of my ugly self that I didn't want to see, yet it was hard to look away.

"You are so sweet." Wakasugi held me tightly, kissed me, and then asked, "You are so sweet, yet how come you are also so very cold?"

Four months had passed since we had started living together. There were times that Wakasugi went back to his own place and didn't return for a few days. I knew he was busy working on his play but it still crossed my mind several times that he would never come back to me. I had a feeling that our relationship would be over soon. Wakasugi and I were different in so many ways. The way we thought, the forces that shaped our personalities, etc. We were almost complete opposites. I wasn't going to let myself get serious about a relationship with a man who was so utterly incompatible, but I was still terrified of losing him.

Once he didn't return for a whole week. I looked at his bag that was placed in the corner of my room, and thought to myself, *What am I gonna do with his stuff?* I'd tried to make some closet space for him so that he could put his stuff away but Wakasugi insisted on keeping his things packed in a bag. To me it meant that he could easily leave anytime, that he was going to leave sooner or later, that he wouldn't stay with me for long. I could live with Wakasugi precisely because I knew this. I was just clutching at him to flatter my own conceit.

One day at dawn, Wakasugi came back to my apartment. I sensed his presence and jumped out of the bed. "You're back," I said. Wakasugi smiled, looking surprised.

"Did you miss me?"

I didn't actually miss him, but I didn't want him to leave me yet. I reached out and pulled out the bottom of his shirt. Wakasugi fell into bed and hugged me. He always dressed lightly, and his body was chilled to the bone. The coldness of his skin somehow soothed me. So when he repeatedly asked, "You missed me, didn't you?" I didn't deny it. I just accepted his kisses, which I usually found annoying.

"I thought there was someone else," I pouted and Wakasugi laughed away and said, "No way. I don't two-time. That's why I quickly move in with a new partner. That way, I can keep an eye out so that my lover doesn't have an affair."

That was a really one-sided assumption. I had never even considered that someone would cheat on Wakasugi. It was like I was seeing an entirely new side of him that I never knew of before, and I looked away. At that time, I honestly didn't want to see any part of Wakasugi's personality beyond the way I perceived him.

"You are needy."

"My first love had someone else. I was quite serious about him, but he wouldn't break up with his other partner. I guess that's how it started. I feel insecure unless I'm with my partner. When you're always with someone, you sort of become alike, don't you think? Start liking the same foods, talking the same way and stuff. I kind of like that. Before you know it, my partner begins to feel the same way about things that I do. That makes me more happy than anything."

That might have indicated, in a way, his lust for dominance. But I didn't want to be dominated in that way. I didn't want anybody to influence me, nor did I feel any desire to influence anyone else.

"You look surprised. I wonder what kind of person I am in your mind."

When I first met him, he seemed to be an arrogant egomaniac, who had never experienced rejection from anybody. He would interpret everything according to an alpha male's logic, or so I'd thought. I'd assumed that he would put me under his dominance with an overwhelming physical type of power. Wakasugi laughed, seeming as though he had read my mind. "I know how you want me to be. You like it when I make love forcefully. You like a man who doesn't care at all how you feel. You feel more comfortable with a man like that. I wonder why, though."

"Th... that's not true," I denied, without even thinking. "I've never felt comfortable with anybody. I'm not used to letting my guard down. I always wanna be on edge. You probably don't understand but I feel uneasy unless I'm constantly condemned and humiliated."

"Why do you wanna be condemned and humiliated?" Wakasugi asked in a grave tone. I got flustered and looked away.

"How should I know?"

"Who's condemning you? Has anyone condemned you for being a bad person?"

"No, nobody has."

Actually, it was my mother that I was thinking about. When I was a high school student, my mother became aware of my sexuality. She never confronted me about it, but I was sure she knew. My mother didn't blame me, but blamed herself instead. For my parents' sake, I hadn't wanted to be the cause of shame, but reality is always far away from the ideal image. That gap was what tormented me, causing a knot in my stomach.

Wakasugi looked perplexed and gently reached for my cheek.

"Noda, there aren't many truly good people, but not all of them live with a sense of guilt either. You're an honest kind of guy. If you're bad, what about me?"

"No matter what you tell me, you can't change the way I feel. Nothing can change that."

Condemnation was a spiritual liberation and a sexual release for me. That was why I preferred violent and degrading sex, rather than the more normal type of lovemaking with its gentle kisses and cuddling.

"You actually feel better if you're disgraced? Normally, it's the opposite. But you feel more secure that way?"

"You move in with your partner for a sense of security, right? Everybody is different. People have their own ways of feeling secure." I had a dark place in

my heart, like an infected wound oozing pus. I kept trying to ignore it, but Wakasugi had become aware of it through our relationship. He invaded me just like I wanted, while looking like he was feeling sorry for me. To me, he was a saint. He was the only ...

He hugged me from behind, burying his nose in my hair. "But I don't like to see you abased, even if it gives you mental security and stability."

My bed was a single bed and naturally narrow so Wakasugi normally slept on a futon after our lovemaking. Once I attained orgasm, the body heat from someone else became simply bothersome to me, so while Wakasugi wanted us to fall asleep together, I wanted to sleep alone. One morning, however, I found Wakasugi on top of me. I drowsily asked him to stop, but Wakasugi licked me all over and kissed me over and over again. He bit my earlobe and kept calling my name.

"I love you."

At first I thought I was just dreaming, so I didn't try really hard to resist. Then Wakasugi took my underwear off. With my bottom suddenly exposed to cold air, I startled fully awake.

"What do you think you're doing?"

"Well, you look normal in your sleep, so let's do it like normal people. You know, kissing and cuddling and all that."

I frowned. I'd lose control if he started doing stuff like that. Fragments of my emotions would start aching and.... "I don't get excited by that kind of thing. You know that."

"Just for a change. I'm sort of tired of tying you up and playing with toys."

I knew we would break up eventually, but I was still attached to him. To hear him say he was bored was reason enough for me to reluctantly comply.

"I won't be able to get it up."

"Well, you're able to get it up with a woman, too. Right, Noda? You don't ask a woman to humiliate you or be rough with you. So I just want to try the normal way for a change."

It sounded like he was teasing me, but his eyes were serious. He must have given a lot of thought to this moment. I didn't have much choice other than playing along. The morning sunlight was coming through the curtains, and the bedsheets were reflecting the light brightly. I squinted my eyes and pictured an image, which burnt itself into the depths of my consciousness. I was feeling bemused as I opened my legs. Wakasugi held my limp cock gently while

kissing the shell of my ear. He kissed me his way across my body voraciously. I felt goosebumps. Wakasugi's tongue felt too sweet to pretend that a bug was simply crawling all over my body. He stroked me gently and I became erect.

"See, you can get it up."

It did feel good, but I didn't feel comfortable like always. I felt nervous and restless.

"Stop ... I...t, please," I begged brokenly.

"How come? You're responding. He's a cute guy." He played with my cock and smiled.

"N...o."

I was feeling hot, abashed out of a strange sense of humiliation. Our usual sex session gave me an overwhelming sense of shame too, but during those I didn't have to think. All I had to do was obey. This was different. It gave me a tingling sensation that bothered me.

"You have too much pride, Noda," Wakasugi murmured to himself, looking down at me. I was twisting and turning under him. "It seems like you are letting me do whatever I want, but it's not true. You only need someone you can control. You don't have any space in your mind for my true self, who might do things you don't desire. You'll adjust my image, correcting and tweaking it to your liking. Who am I anyways? Am I the one who forced you into a homosexual relationship? Just the guy who would fuck you, sponge off of you, and then just leave? You want me to stay with you only so far as it doesn't inconvenience you. Sometime in the future, you'll remember me as someone who victimized you, that I did whatever I wanted. Will only the memory of violent sex get you excited then?"

I felt a chill. Wakasugi was being harshly critical, but his voice was serenely calm. If he understood that much, I didn't understand why he didn't just leave. I opened my eyes wide, stunned. He looked at me and smiled softly.

"I don't mean to blame you for anything. I touch up your image in my mind so that it suits me, too. I'm being hopeful, Noda. I really like you."

He repeated that he liked me many times, making my chest ache.

"Why ...?"

No matter how violently he treated me, I never felt any pain. Now he treated me gently, and I felt my heart start bleeding.

"Why do you say things like that? You only need to treat me like you just don't care. That's all I want. I'm not ... into a serious relationship with you."

Each word I uttered slashed me like a knife, wounding me. But I had to say them.

"I knew it," Wakasugi chuckled softly. "Why didn't you say so from the beginning? My being was only convenient for you to satisfy your perverse desires. If you love someone dearly, you can't do all that kinky stuff, right? But it's okay to do it with me. It's okay to have you exposed in the most shameful position to me. It's all because you don't care about me."

I couldn't deny it. I was going to end my relationship with Wakasugi. I'd known that from the very beginning. I hadn't thought that I was capable of hurting him. When Wakasugi got tired of me, he would just go find someone else in no time. He would leave me without lingering, so I'd wanted him to use me as he pleased in the meantime. It was true that I had formed an image of Wakasugi that I'd idealized.

Anger flickered inside his eyes. All of a sudden, his normally soft voice boomed. "Say it! You just want me to do it. That's all you want. Say it like you mean it. You only need to be condemned and humiliated. When you're trapped, that's the only time you show any feeling." Wakasugi pinned down my arms onto the bed. But the intimidating tension didn't last long. He slowly fell down upon me and covered my lips with his. I was expecting a violent and rough kiss, but, to the contrary, it was a softly sweet kiss. Our eyes met. Wakasugi clasped me gently, while his expression showed a trace of bitterness. He knew that such tender treatment would hurt me far more than physical violence. Wakasugi kissed me gently many times, while caressing my body. His palm was hot. His breathing with its quiet sighs and the gentle touch of his lips seemed to imply a silent question. My heart cracked a little more each time that I heard him say that he liked me.

I tried to escape from him but he caught my arm and pulled me closer. Our bodies touched and somehow the contact confused me. I didn't know exactly what it was that I was so afraid of. Wakasugi, on the other hand, acted like it was payback time. He made love tenderly, caressing me with great care. Wakasugi kept stroking my head even after we were done. I wanted to push him off, but I also felt ambivalent at the same time. I guess I didn't know how to act around him anymore. He probably felt the same way. Wakasugi held me from behind, burying his nose in my hair like always. Then he whispered and it was as if he was talking directly to something inside my head. "What should I do? You may be more than I can handle."

That was the last time I slept with Wakasugi. We still lived together for about a week after that, but no longer had sex. It was very unlikely that

Wakasugi wanted anything to do with me, either. Without sex, there was nothing between Wakasugi and me. We weren't even friends. I knew so little about Wakasugi.

"Is it better if I'm not here?" Wakasugi asked and I nodded.

"Okay then."

Wakasugi grabbed his bag from the corner of the room and left. It was such a casual move that it looked like he was just going to the convenience store nearby. The way he left was exactly how I had pictured it. From time to time, Horikoshi brought up his name in conversation, but I never saw Wakasugi again.



An hour after the first phone call in ten years, the intercom chimed. I opened the door to find a long-forgotten face.

"I accepted your invitation."

Despite now being in his thirties, I saw that Wakasugi hadn't changed much since college. The dark circles under his eyes were age-appropriate, but his trim form was the same. His eyes looked a bit milder, which might be a sign of maturing. When he was younger, he appeared edgier. Now he looked more composed and a bit subdued around his mouth, but his body was just the same as before.

He was wearing a charcoal gray turtleneck, black trousers, and a black sport coat. He was still very attractive and noticeable. "It's been a long time."

Wakasugi stepped inside, staring at me with a broad smile.

"You haven't changed much, Noda. I was expecting some old fart, but I guess an emotionless mask doesn't age, huh?"

"Good to see you, too."

Wakasugi laughed out loud. I noticed some wrinkles around his eyes when he laughed. *Oh, he has aged some.*

I must have changed some too for sure. I felt like I was way past my prime. When I was younger, I was unpretentious and unnoticeable. Now I looked imperturbable and put together to other people, and women often made passes at me. But I had the emotions of a vegetable, and I had no interest in those women. I couldn't make love to Naoko because of that. I had no desire to boast that I was a man who could satisfy women, anyway.

I felt the same indifference about men, too. In my youth, after my relationship with Wakasugi, I had gone to places that attracted our kind of men. I occasionally found a partner back then. But in recent times, I didn't feel up to it anymore. I don't think my sexual preferences have changed at all. The compulsive urge to satisfy my sexual desires was simply gone.

If I hadn't met Wakasugi, I would have led a sexless life. Given my inclinations, I might have never been able to get serious with a woman, but I would have never gathered the courage to actually sleep with a man. If I hadn't met Wakasugi, I would have been perfectly satisfied with homo-erotic fantasies. If that is the case, was it really a good thing that I had met Wakasugi? Or was it a bad thing? Then again, it was all hypothetical. All this was way back in the past.

"Would you like some beer?"

I showed him into the living room and brought some beer and a few snacks out to the table. I was afraid that an emotional storm would go through my mind once I saw Wakasugi. To my surprise, my mind remained tranquil without even a ripple of anxiety. Wakasugi was most likely as apprehensive as I was. His expression showed a subtle sense of relief. We sat down on the sofa and looked at each other afresh. I couldn't help but burst into laughter. "What is it?" Wakasugi said, laughing.

"You look dumbfounded. After your phone call, I was worried that you would bring all kinds of trouble."

"That feeling's mutual. What do you mean? Trouble? Am I a trouble magnet to you?"

Wakasugi opened a beer can and handed it to me, grinning. We said our toasts at the same time.

"So, how have you been? I heard about your divorce through the grapevine, so I thought about coming to console you."

"I'm doing fine, you don't have to worry about me. What about you? You said you got kicked out. When did you get married? I never heard about that."

"Never married. My partner was a man. A young man in our theatrical group. We've been together for about two years now but it didn't work out. It was a relatively long lasting relationship for me so it's hitting me pretty hard."

"Theatrical group? Are you still doing that?"

Horikoshi had told me that Wakasugi worked in the theater, but I'd never paid that much attention to the details. Wakasugi was now working as a director and he told me the name of his troupe. Even I had heard of them, though I was almost completely out of touch with that world.

"I'll come see your play next time."

Wakasugi acted like he couldn't believe what he just heard. Then he smiled happily and said, "I'll send you a ticket. You've been with the bank all this time?"

"All according to plan. The divorce was unexpected, though."

Having met Wakasugi was an unexpected event as well. I thought to myself. I couldn't and didn't mean to say anything about it now. We were basically catching up with each other, trying to fill in ten years of blanks.

Retrospectively, we had hardly ever talked like this when we were living together. Maybe we should have talked like this more then. I was very relaxed now. More relaxed with his presence than at any other time in the past. I had to go to work the next day so we called it a day before midnight rolled around. I laid out a futon for him in a tatami mat room on the first floor. I would be lying if I said that it didn't make me feel self-conscious to sleep under the same roof with him. But ten years is a very long time. Too long. Now that I'd seen him, I didn't want our past emotions to come between us. We'd felt a little foolish when we saw each other now precisely because we realized the length of time we had been apart. We hadn't understood that, though, until we actually met again.

Wakasugi had just broke up with his boyfriend, whereas I was about to get a divorce after four years of marriage. We couldn't possibly pick up where we left off, and start arguing over something which happened ten years ago.

It's all in the past. I kept telling myself this while straining to hear any sign of Wakasugi's presence downstairs. I thought I might hear footsteps. I remembered the night of my first encounter with Wakasugi. The way he'd stood by my pillow, watching me intently. The night remained still and quiet. No sound or noise.

I'm the only one feeling self-conscious.

I felt rather foolish for having such ridiculous thoughts. I chuckled quietly in self-mockery.

"Did you sleep well?" Wakasugi asked me first thing the next morning at the breakfast table.

I said yes but actually I hadn't slept well at all. "What about you?" I asked. He replied, "I did," but his eyes looked a little red to me.

Wakasugi offered me an envelope with some money inside. He wanted me to take it to help with the living expenses. "I don't need it," I said, trying to

return the envelope. But he refused to take it back, so I reluctantly ended up accepting it. I remembered that when we'd lived together during our college years, Wakasugi had always been responsible about money despite his lax attitude in other areas.

Several days went by. I kept remembering how it was before between us, which made me overly self-conscious. The events in my foolish thoughts on that first night never came to pass. The more days that followed without event, the more foolish I thought I was being. I didn't feel miserable or self-pitying. It was rather laughable, my hyper-awareness and Wakasugi's demeanor. Everything was so far in the past, I felt. The separation of ten years allowed me to calmly accept the present circumstances. It wasn't a bad feeling. An old friend was visiting, but he wasn't staying forever. Nothing more, nothing less.

Wakasugi had an erratic schedule. Occasionally, he'd be gone for a few days. At other times, he'd be home all day even on weekdays. He occasionally surprised me with a fairly elaborate homemade meal when I returned home from work. I used to prepare my own meals as a student, but I stopped doing it after getting married. My wife was a full-time homemaker and the kitchen was her turf. I now rarely stepped into the kitchen, as a matter of fact. After she left, I hadn't felt much like cooking after coming home from work, so I usually got some takeaway.

When I'd lived with Wakasugi before, it was me that did all the cooking. Ten years later, Wakasugi was the one feeding me home cooked meals. An interesting turn of events, I thought. "Great," I complimented as I took a bite. Wakasugi acted as if he was proud.

"You were relying on your wife for the cooking and other housework, right? They say that husbands should help sometimes, doing the dishes and such. Maybe she got fed up because you weren't doing any of it."

Hey, you should talk. You didn't do any of it when you were younger. I wanted to say it out loud but I swallowed the words. He once told me that he liked a neat person because he was an untidy slob. The same man, ten years later, was very handy around the house. I thought about how he got there, and mixed feelings swelled up inside of me. Wakasugi must have sensed it that I was reminiscing about our past. "Of course, I'm in no position to give you any advice. You got fed up with me then," he said, making an attempt to brighten up an awkward mood. I just smiled vaguely while my heart started beating fast and hard. I felt bittersweet emotions rise inside of me, to my chagrin.

A week, then two weeks, passed. I began to have the false illusion that Wakasugi and I had always been together. Our reunion brought back memories of the Wakasugi from before, and, at the same time, gave me a new and fresh look at him as well. We'd slept together blindly back then. This was the first time to really see him, while keeping some distance between us. He was the same man, yet he seemed like a completely different person to me. Then again, there were times when I was convinced that he was the same person. When I came to that realization, I became restless.

Two men living together wasn't bad. Just being together while remaining aloof, without the entanglement of a passionate love affair, was not bad at all indeed. At first, I'd imagined Wakasugi sneaking up on me in the middle of the night. Now I was wondering what would happen if I crept up on him. Would he simply laugh and say, "That's a bad joke." Or would he-

None of that would happen, of course. I knew that already. That was exactly why I was playing around with it in my foolish imagination. It wasn't that I had an urge to sleep with him but that something deep inside my body ached slightly just by being with him. It was a subtle feeling that I kept tamped down. I had no intention of acting on my fantasies, but I was definitely excited at the mere thought. It could happen though, I thought. When it came down to it, we could go back to the way we once were, forgetting the fact that we were both adults now.

Forcing myself to keep some distance, therefore, made me comfortable. Wakasugi might have been feeling the same way.

"Ouch ..." Wakasugi whined, putting his finger to his mouth. I had just came out of the bath and walked out into the living room, where Wakasugi was clipping his nails.

"Did you cut yourself? Do you need a band-aid?"

"No, I just cut too far down. Cutting the nails on my right hand is difficult."

He was clumsy that way. He might have been acting powerless before to show some dependence on me, but I did used to clip his nails during our time together. Wakasugi was remembering the same thing, I thought. Our eyes met and he smiled.

"Could you cut them for me?"

"Sure. Hand me the nail clippers."

He looked a bit startled at my answer, but he gave me the nail clippers anyway. I didn't want to give him the pleasure of seeing me flustered so I pretended to keep my cool. There was another reason for my immediate response. I had to admit to myself that I wanted to touch him. I expected him to

start teasingly talking about how it was before. Instead, he was strangely quiet. Clip clip. The only sound to be heard was that of the clippers. I was touching his firm, dry and limber fingers and from his skin, remnants of past memories crept back into me, depriving me of speech.

"There, it's done."

I let go of his hand when Wakasugi then requested, "My toes, too." I could have easily told him to forget it, but displaying discomposure meant losing to him. I had to prove that I had some self-control.

"Okay, give me your foot."

It was a somewhat comical scene, two grown-up men engaged in nail clipping. I placed Wakasugi's foot on my lap and started clipping his toenails. Wakasugi burst into laughter, unable to hold it back any longer.

"Please be more gentle."

"Don't be so demanding. You should be thankful that I'm doing this for you."

"I am thankful."

Wakasugi fell silent once again. I wanted him to say something, anything. The clippers sound by itself made me over aware of the body heat radiating from his skin. When I was finished with his last toenail, I pushed his foot away.

"Noda, I'll clip your nails."

Wakasugi forcibly grabbed my ankle to pull my feet up.

"Whoa! What are you doing? Stop it."

Wakasugi wouldn't listen to me. He brought the nail clippers towards my toes. I couldn't quite resist from that posture and ended up floundering about until I surrendered. Wakasugi was carefully handling the nail clippers. I felt awkward, imagining his fingers were hot. He was concentrating on the task at hand. I found myself gazing at his frowning face. He carefully clipped my toenails one by one. Each time he finished with one toe, I wished I had more than five toes on my foot.

"Why didn't it work out with your wife, Noda?"

I was stumped by his unexpected question.

"I suppose it was my fault. I didn't listen to her side of the story."

"What was her side of story? You didn't have any affairs. You're not a gambler, either. What could she possibly complain about? I was quite surprised, though, when I heard about your marriage."

I didn't know what to say back to his tantalizing tone. Then I caught a glimpse of a dim light in his eyes.

"Could you make love to her?"

He came straight down to the core question. I couldn't even hide my jolt of surprise.

"It's none of your business."

"It is. That's why I'm asking you. I don't think you can do it with women properly. You like someone making love to you. Men. You felt such pleasure with me back then."

"..."

I stared at him in silence. Wakasugi chuckled without showing any prick of conscience.

"Sorry. I got carried away."

"Forget about my toenails! I don't wanna talk about the past with you! Let's not get into that! We're adults now!" I desperately tried to retain my composure as I cried out. I certainly could have shaken off Wakasugi's hands, but I didn't want to.

"Yeah, those were things of the past."

Wakasugi let go of my foot obediently.

"I'm not trying to be mean or anything. I don't know about you but I liked making love to you. I was obsessed with it. It was like falling into an abyss which was somewhere deep inside of you. I've never felt that with anyone else."

I couldn't bring myself to make an appropriately agreeable response. I tried to keep an impassive face while getting up from the sofa to leave. If I stayed by Wakasugi any longer, I would have shouted something I would have regretted.

What does he want me to say? Does he wanna hear that it was indeed a feeling sheer pleasure for me when he made love to me?

Those things were in the past. I knew it. But I felt an indescribable urge swelling up, triggered by his touch on my toes. I went into my room and lay down on the bed. I felt a tightening within my balls, almost painful in intensity. I thought of Wakasugi's somewhat dry fingers and touched myself to satisfy my lust. Just thinking of Wakasugi's fingers evoked a powerful sexual reaction.

I didn't think I'd feel anything. But my mind had a place that would overflow with tender sweetness at that simple soft touch of his. Wakasugi was the only one who could touch me that way. I kept stroking my cock, now completely hardened. I wasn't thinking of Wakasugi the student. I was thinking of him as he was now in his thirties. I was imagining my grown-up self having sex with Wakasugi. I took a deep breath and looked down at my wet palm. Those things were in the past, so then what? It's been so long.

"How much longer are we going to live like this?" I said to myself with a

grin of embarrassment. But I knew, deep down, that the end to this limbo would come in the near future. Just like during our college years, I knew that he wasn't going to stay with me forever. I wasn't letting him, either. But I could, at least, indulge my foolish imagination for as long as Wakasugi was staying. *Is it an ember from the past? Do I want it to grow cold? Or do I want to keep holding it deep inside of me?*

I gave myself over to the afterglow of pleasure, which I truly felt for the first time in many years. I just didn't know what to think any more.

The end came sooner than expected.

On my day off, I was sleeping late into the afternoon, when a sound coming from the intercom woke me up. It appeared that Wakasugi was out. I hurried to the front door and answered in a grouchy voice as I was feeling out of sorts upon waking.

"Who is it?"

"I'm sorry to bother you like this, but I'm a business acquaintance of Wakasugi-san. Sakaguchi is my name."

Hearing a young man's voice, I instantly became wide awake.

I opened the door and gasped at the sight of his face. Before me stood a young man in his early twenties. But what surprised me most was ...

"Sorry, but Wakasugi-san is staying here, right? He didn't take very many things, so I brought him a change of clothes. Could you... give these to him?"

His voice was shaky. I wasn't the only one who was surprised. The man who introduced himself as Sakaguchi was obviously dismayed to see my face, too.

"I'll make sure he gets them," I responded in a very business-like manner. I didn't want him to suspect that I was overly interested in him or that I was upset. This young man was undoubtedly the partner Wakasugi had just broken up with. I didn't want to see his face any longer. It wasn't jealousy. It was more like fear, giving me a chill. Sakaguchi looked a lot like me.

He looked calm and quiet. He looked a little nervous in his silence. His face, physique, and the aura radiating from him were all like me. More precisely, he looked how I used to look in my college days. Right now, the guy in front of me looks like he could be my brother. Wakasugi's current partner looked like me as a college student. I had to withdraw him from my sight as quickly as I could. But Sakaguchi didn't share that impulse. I desperately wanted to shut the door right then, but he didn't show any signs of leaving.

"Forgive me for asking, but are you Wakasugi-san's friend?"

"Yes, I am."

"Doesn't Wakasugi-san staying here inconvenience your family?"

That was clearly an intrusive question and I frowned.

"I'm a bachelor now. I'm separated from my wife."

Sakaguchi's countenance completely changed in a chameleon-like fashion.

He must have taken me for Wakasugi's new lover. His assumption was very justifiable. He could tell that I would be Wakasugi's type just by looking at my face. For some reason, it made me feel miserable. We might look alike, but I was not only all grown up but was a married man even. Wakasugi's most current partner was the man in front of me, not me. Ten long years had passed since Wakasugi and I shared such a relationship. I felt like an moron, having had all those ludicrous fantasies running around in my head.

"I'll give this stuff to him. Thank you."

I started to close the door when Sakaguchi took a step forward and said, "Wait."

"Could you please tell Wakasugi-san that I'll get out of the condo? After all, it's his place and he should go back there."

If he was leaving the place that they shared, then he should have just gone ahead and left without saying anything. Why should he care about what happened after? I railed at him in my mind, but carefully schooled my facial expression.

"Okay, I'll tell him. Is there anything else?"

Sakaguchi hesitated for a moment.

"When he returns, I'd like to talk it over just one more time. Could you tell him that, too?"

"Alright."

"Thank you very much."

Sakaguchi bowed several times, saying, "Thank you." He was trying hard to remain composed, but it was obvious that he'd completely lost his cool. He might have been upset and suspected there was a new lover already in Wakasugi's life, but all he'd said was, "I'd like to talk it over." And he was bowing and asking his presumed rival to relay that message.

He was genial, expressing his feelings so straightforwardly to a total stranger. That was definitely not in my nature. Not then, and not now. I'd never felt such desperately passionate feelings. When I realized this, the tight knot in my chest suddenly dissolved. My relationship with Wakasugi had been over for ten years. I knew that the whole thing was in the past. But now that I saw his

young partner, I also knew that I had been refusing to completely admit to this truth.

I said not know if I was pleased or sad about it. I couldn't help but smile awkwardly. Then I said to this young man, "I will relay your message. Rest assured."

At the dinner table, I told him about Sakaguchi's visit. Wakasugi froze, looking astonished.

"Did you meet him?"

"Yeah. There's a message from him, too. He would like to talk things over with you."

I said this casually. Wakasugi pressed his forehead as if to say that it was a nuisance, and he glanced up at me. He appeared to be waiting for a response, so I went on to say one thing too many.

"You're an adult now. You need to give him some proper closure at the very least. I thought that he'd gotten fed up with you and kicked you out, but that didn't seem to be the case."

"He's fed up with me, alright. I could sense that he wanted to split up, so I left. He just doesn't want to admit that. If I go back, we'll only end up arguing again."

"Tell him that, so he'll understand where you're coming from."

"I guess so."

I regretted crossing the line. I'd been prepared to hear him say, "I don't want to hear that from you," but he looked solemn instead.

"Sakaguchi told me I wasn't serious enough. He said, 'I am so serious and crazy about you, Wakasugi-san. But you don't care about me, you're just trifling with me however you please.' What could I possibly say to that? Shit."

When he was younger, Wakasugi had been overly clingy, to the point of being annoying. He obviously could have had anybody he wanted. On the surface, he appeared to be bit of a profligate, a real social butterfly. But, in fact, there weren't very many guys who could be as touchy-feely as Wakasugi. Then again, he might have changed. A long time had passed since then.

"Don't ask me. My wife left me, remember?"

"Don't be so heartless. You can give me your opinion, can't you?"

Wakasugi smiled, which then faded away. He now wore a shadow upon his face.

"I never know how close to get with my partners. I really don't know how

much space we should have between us. That probably makes my partner feel insecure. I mean in terms of proper distance and space; I terribly misjudged that once in the past."

I felt a sharp ache in my chest at what his words suggested.

Misjudged, was he talking about me? He'd changed because of me?

There was an awkward silence. Wakasugi, who had been pondering with his head lowered, abruptly looked me right in the eyes.

"Noda, you didn't feel anything when you saw Sakaguchi?"

"What do you ...?"

"Didn't you think he looked like you?"

I hadn't thought that Wakasugi would bring that up.

"You think?"

I tried to play innocent but he wouldn't allow it.

"Yes, he does. He looks a lot like you as a college student. His personality isn't that much like yours. But the overall atmosphere, mood, and aura he gives off are similar."

I didn't know what Wakasugi was getting at. I had no idea what he wanted me to say.

Right then, the phone rang, feeling like like a helping hand reaching out to me. I jumped up to pick up the receiver. It was my wife, Naoko.

"Dear ...?"

She sounded stiff. I asked her how she was doing, but she didn't respond.

"I heard that you've now got a friend is staying with you?"

"Uh, sorry. I was gonna tell you about it soon."

I hadn't thought Wakasugi would be staying this long, and I'd been planning to explain everything to Naoko when a convenient opportunity arose.

Unfortunately, my vague, fumbling answer seemed to have pushed her buttons.

"Sorry? You're sorry?! What were you thinking? I had to hear it from a neighbor friend. I was so embarrassed, can you imagine? Do you think you can do whatever you want to do with that house? What am I to you?"

She would come at me again with both barrels if I said anything back to her. I knew better than that and so remained silent.

"You've always been like that. Always... You've never cared about my feelings. Why didn't you consult me with me about it? I don't understand you, not at all. You make me feel unimportant and unappreciated."

I exhaled quietly, listening to the one-sided barrage of words coming from the receiver. I don't even remember when it happened but I'd lost all will to even attempt a reasonable conversation with Naoko long before this. There had

been times when we seemed to get along just fine. But in her mind, those times most likely never existed. If she was unable to have things exactly the way she'd wanted them to go, then she felt that the relationship may just as well have never existed. Naoko was now trying to condemn everything I thought and did.

"... I will explain everything later. I'm really sorry, but my friend was in a spot of trouble. It's not that I think this house belongs only to me or anything."

After several more exchanges back and forth, Naoko finally hung up the phone.

The moment I set the receiver down, I felt a weariness almost crushing my shoulders.

When I returned to the dining table, Wakasugi didn't even try to resume our previous conversation. He'd heard my voice, so he was well aware whom I'd been speaking with, and what it was that we were arguing about. A short while later, the awkward silence was broken.

"Was it your wife?"

"Yup. She's always like that," I said coolly. I didn't want to talk about my wife with Wakasugi.

After we finished our dinner, Wakasugi abruptly spoke.

"Thanks for all your trouble. I'll leave tomorrow."

To that, I could only nod.

I had a hard time falling asleep that night. Sakaguchi's visit and Naoko's phone call had brought me back to reality. It was probably the same for Wakasugi, too.

'No more dwelling on the past,' they'd made us realize, so Wakasugi had then told me that he was leaving. Wakasugi had that young man to deal with. I had to end or repair my relationship with Naoko as well.

"You only need to be condemned and humiliated," Wakasugi once said to me. That really would be a simple state of affairs for me. That might be why I was avoiding the conclusion to our marriage, even if the end was inevitable. Naoko had put me in a tight corner now. A little button-pushing would trigger an explosion. I couldn't provide ordinary happiness to Naoko. I should probably spend the rest of my days trying to make up for that. So, now I knew what to do about Naoko. But what about Wakasugi? The issues with Wakasugi and those with Naoko were entirely different matters. I'd imagined some stupid things about Wakasugi after our reunion. That was because there was a place in

my heart that I'd sealed ten years ago, always trying to look the other way from it and deny its existence. I once almost hoped that Wakasugi could be more than someone who would merely corner me. Actually, it was Wakasugi who did all the hoping. What was it that he wanted from me? I felt thirsty from all this thinking, so I went downstairs and saw that the light was on in the dining room. Wakasugi was sitting at the table, drinking sake.

Wakasugi noticed me and raised his glass.

"Hi. I'm helping myself to some sake. I couldn't sleep."

"Isn't that a cooking sake? Since I don't drink sake, that'd be all I've got. Is it any good?"

"Any sake is fine now."

I took out a beer and sipped it. Wakasugi was resting his chin on top of his clasped hands with his back slightly slouched. His shoulders seemed to have some weight upon them. Seen from the front, his handsome features were just like they had been before. Losing his youth actually made the excellence of his figure stand out more. His vulnerable back, however, was definitely showing signs of aging. The weight of the years he'd lived and a hint of loneliness showed on his back. As a man in his prime, he had to conceal them in broad daylight. Those were sort of like deposits: deposits of his weariness. Everyone carried them on their shoulders. There was no escape from time and regret. My back likely looked the same.

My hand trembled unexpectedly. I thought about sitting next to him, but I yearned to keep looking at Wakasugi's back.

"You know, I was traumatized when you dumped me," Wakasugi suddenly whispered.

Alcohol must have loosened his lips. He had never spoken about our break-up until now.

"Each time I break up with someone, I always remember how it happened with you. Then I think to myself that 'this is nothing compared to how it was with Noda. I can get over this.'"

I couldn't say anything right away.

"Did I dump you, Wakasugi?"

"You dumped me. You said it was better if I was not there, remember? I had a very hard time getting over that." Chuckling, he turned to me.

It was a revelation for me to hear Wakasugi's interpretation of events. I had always thought that it was Wakasugi who had given up on me.

"But it was for the best after all, I think. If I had stayed with you much longer, I might have ended up hating you. I loved you, and I didn't want

that to change. So that was as far as we could have gone.”

I’d thought that I was merely satisfying my sexual desires. That I could not have gotten serious about a relationship with a guy, considering my supposed destiny. Wakasugi might have wanted to be serious back then, but I didn’t. At least, I hadn’t think that was the case. Even if we could go back, my actions would probably be exactly the same. I would basically end up hurting both Wakasugi and myself.

“What am I saying? I know, it’s such a long time ago. But I’ve been always worried about you. I don’t know why. Maybe because I didn’t handle it very well. If only I’d accepted the way you were, it could have been different. I still regret that. I know that there’s nothing I can do about it now, but I just can’t stop thinking about us.”

Wakasugi didn’t seem to mind my silence. Maybe he wasn’t even talking to me. Maybe he was talking to our ten-year-old past, which he sees in me.

“There’s a deep bottomless hole inside of you, Noda. When I held you, I could enter that emotional abyss and be united with you. It felt really good to me. I wanted you to love me back. I didn’t wanna condemn and humiliate you. I hated that role. I couldn’t understand why it had to be that way at all.”

Wakasugi stopped talking. He seemed to think about something for a while with his head down, and then he turned back to me.

“Are you still needing condemnation? Do you still have to have someone constantly blaming you?”

I felt an almost uncontrollable urge to say, “It’s too late now,” but I swallowed it.

I had dated a few women, gotten married, and now was on the verge of divorce. People viewed me as someone who’d been there and done that. But I’d never fallen in love with anyone, not in a true sense. There might have been some chances for it, but I’d wasted them. I had been completely exposed while having sex with Wakasugi. After we broke up, I’d a recurrent dream about sex with Wakasugi. Even while having a fling with a random stranger, I couldn’t help but compare him with Wakasugi.

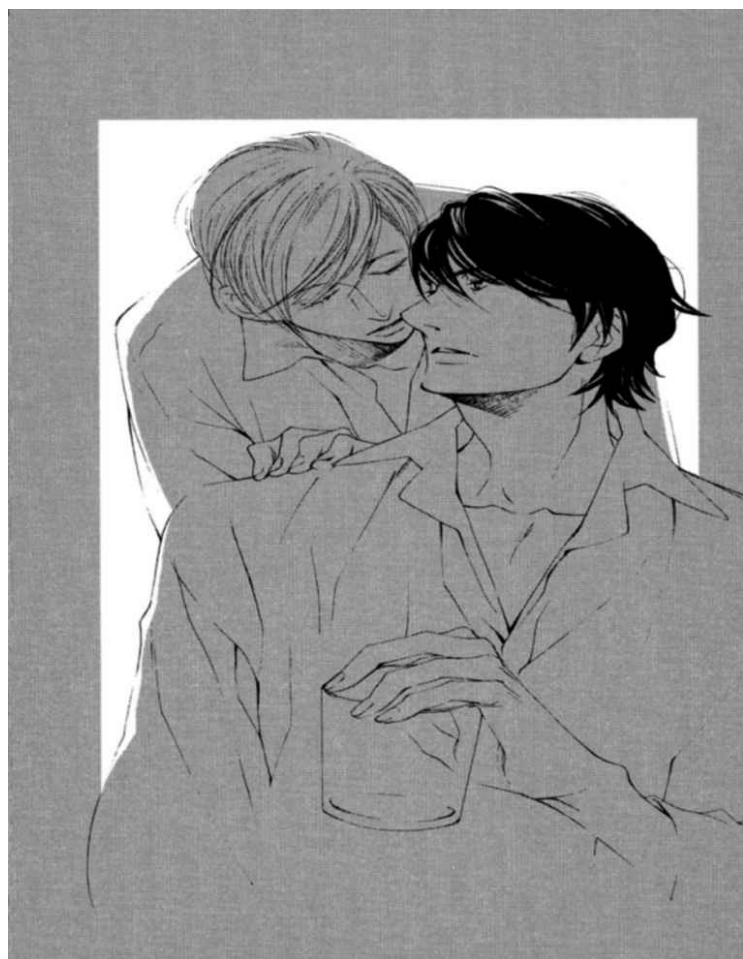
But what I reflected on now was not our violent and passionate sex. Any hard core pornographic memories were now worn away. Like my lust, those memories were exhausted and had dissipated. Back then, I hadn’t known the difference between sexual desire and love. Even if I had known, it probably wouldn’t have mattered anyway. What I had then was a sort of all-inclusive energy. A ball of energy that didn’t know any other way to express itself except for an urgent need to cry out, “I want it!”

Such desperate urges had now subsided. What was still vividly left in my memory were the random impressions Wakasugi left on me. His staring eyes, being mad at me for refusing his kisses. His voice, whispering half-jokingly, "I love you," in my ears. Maybe it had been more like a prayer from him. But most importantly, I still vividly remember the mild heat and the achingly sweet pain I'd always felt upon seeing his eyes and hearing his voice.

"I'm being hopeful," Wakasugi had said.

The thoughts, desires and hopes of any two people never overlap completely with the same intensity, the same shape, and the same direction. Everyone knows it is impossible, but they still can't help hoping or praying that they will become one with a special someone. Everyone modifies their partner's image to one's own likings, in the desperate search for that perfect match. That endeavor, that hope, was what people call love. I might have had similar hopes to Wakasugi's.

If it were a fever, it would only be temporary. Madly delirious for a short while, but no long term effects once it was over. But there was still pain in my heart, sewn into the tenderest of places. How could I explain that?



Am I being hopeful, too? Am I almost praying?

I could just go on. I could start all over again with my wife, that would be one option. Wakasugi might go back and get serious with that young guy who looks like me. Whatever Wakasugi's conclusions might be, I have already made up my mind. I will remain in this softest of spots. I came a long way to get here. The spot which has been here in my heart for ten long, years.

I am still a clumsy, weird person, but this spot inside my heart is beautiful. I'll pray. I'll keep hoping even if it is hopeless. It might not even be possible, but I'll keep searching for it. It might be meaningless and I might end up exposing my ugly side, but I'll keep searching.

Even if the deposits of my life have settled on my heart, even if weariness has enveloped my body like armor, this beautiful place inside of me will stay intact.

"Wakasugi ..."

I called out to him, without knowing what I was going to say.

Be cruel to me?

Be gentle with me?

It was neither.

Wakasugi slowly turned towards me. I placed my hands over his shoulders, bent down, and slowly pressed my lips against his. Wakasugi looked up at me, staggered. Looking closer at him, I could better see the dark shadows under his eyes, which again told me how many years had passed. But Wakasugi would always be a beautiful man to me, no matter how the ugliness of time could make him change.

I kissed Wakasugi again in silence. That surging youthful passion might be gone, but these feelings keep singeing my heart with a gentle flame. The sensation of having a slight fever, one which can never be cured.

Chapter II

"I heard that Wakasugi is sponging off of you, Noda."

I had known that subject would come up. I knew it the moment Horikoshi and I decided to have a drink together, but I still became momentarily flustered when Horikoshi actually brought it up.

It was the Friday after pay day and our regular izakaya was completely full. Horikoshi brought up Wakasugi's name after we started to feel a little buzzed. Horikoshi is a friend from college and I'd first met Wakasugi through Horikoshi. There were a lot of good-looking guys around but Wakasugi was the most handsome guy I had ever seen. He was like a statue. He had a perfect body, everything you could possibly desire in a man. When you saw him in a crowd, his distinct aura of manly beauty completely stood out. It was as though other people faded into the background.

It was hard to describe my relationship with Wakasugi. I actually had just met him again for the first time in ten years.

"Crashing at somebody else's place and stuff, he hasn't changed a bit. But I never thought he would be staying with you, Noda. I didn't think you guys were that close."

Chuckling with a sake reddened face, Horikoshi didn't seem to notice the change in my expression. Horikoshi was always an easy going sort of guy. He had gotten a little portly in his middle age, but the effect he left remained the same as before in my mind.

College friends and work friends are distinctly different. Everybody feels that way. Work friends are friends for practical reasons. College friends are friends for more vague reasons such as, "We just get along well." Every time I see Horikoshi, I feel very relaxed, as if multiple layers of some hard shell surrounding me simply fall away.

Horikoshi believed I wasn't close to Wakasugi, because of my false pretences. "Noda, you weren't that close to Wakasugi back then, huh?" Horikoshi didn't talk too much about Wakasugi with me. Horikoshi was a sensitive guy and I liked that about him, but Horikoshi was also a close friend of Wakasugi's. I seriously doubted that Horikoshi hadn't noticed what was discreetly going on between Wakasugi and me, that he at the very least

suspected something but just didn't say anything. Horikoshi knew Wakasugi's pattern very well. Wakasugi would immediately move into his new lover's place, and his partners weren't necessarily all women. Horikoshi was well aware of all of these things.

As I sipped sake that now tasted bitter somehow, I watched his expression closely.

"No, I wasn't that close to him. In fact, I've never even seen one of his plays. Wakasugi somehow found out that my wife left me and that I was about to get a divorce, so he must have thought I'd have room. When he called, he asked me if I had children. 'I couldn't ask you to let me stay if you had any children.' That's what Wakasugi said."

That was a reasonable explanation, I thought. It wasn't a secret among my friends that my marriage wasn't going well.

"Oh, I see. That's why Wakasugi chose your place."

"You still keep in touch with Wakasugi, right?"

"Yeah, off and on. He sends me tickets for his plays. I try to make it when I can. And when we have time, we say, 'Let's have a drink together.' But we haven't had many chances lately. Oh, I get it now, Wakasugi knew you were about to get a divorce."

"My wife left me shortly after we'd finished building the house. I bet some of the guys were talking about me behind my back. Wakasugi must have caught that gossip. You probably heard the rumors about all that yourself somewhere, didn't you?" I said self-deprecatingly. Horikoshi laughed and downed his cup of sake.

"To tell you the truth, we did talk about your marriage problems quite a bit for awhile whenever we got together." "I knew it."

Talking about my failure with Naoko didn't give me emotional pain any more. I actually felt guilty for feeling so calm about it. It felt as though I was discussing someone else's problem. On the other hand, I totally lost my cool whenever I heard Wakasugi's name and I wondered why that was.

"I kind of understand why Wakasugi turned to you, Noda. I have a feeling that Wakasugi has always wanted to be your friend."

"Wanted to be my friend?"

"He met you through me, right? He was always asking about you. Remember when we had nabe and stuff at your place? Wakasugi was there too, right? He told me, 'Count me in if Noda will be there.' It was mind-boggling to me at the time, because I knew you and Wakasugi would never get along. But then he stopped responding completely to my invitations when I said, 'Hey, do

you want to have a drink with us? Noda'll be there, too.' It was almost like he had a one-sided crush on you."

This was complete news to me. I didn't know why Horikoshi was telling me this stuff. Why did he use the word "crush" anyway? I couldn't figure out what Horikoshi's intentions were.

"Crush is an awkward word to describe a friendship."

"People have crushes on friends. I sort of understand why Wakasugi would fall for someone like you. You were always calm and composed, and it was a challenge for Wakasugi to try and attract your attention. He's an emotional kinda guy. It's his strength as well as his weakness."

"Oh, I just think he wanted everybody's attention."

"He may look like he's not picky but he is very emotional and sensitive. I don't think he's had good luck with his lovers though. He's forever complaining that he always gets dumped. I suspect that he intentionally brings that upon himself. Well, he obviously never had any problems finding a new lover. Anyways, what a guy like Wakasugi may be thinking is beyond me."

"I don't understand it, either."

I felt uneasy. I had no idea where our conversation was going. Horikoshi smiled ambiguously.

"If Wakasugi is staying at your place, you should've invited me over. It would be nice to have a drink together at your place for old times sake."

"That would be nice."

There was something strange about this series of comments. But I didn't think I had to bring that fact up and that Horikoshi would let it slide. I knew he would.

"Can I come over to your place tonight? I want to see Wakasugi, too."

"Unfortunately ..."

I tried to hold back my emotions so that my voice wouldn't tremble uncontrollably. I couldn't quite figure out how I felt about what had happened. It was difficult for me to detach from my emotions altogether.

"Wakasugi isn't at my place any more. He was staying with me for awhile, but he left about a week ago."

Horikoshi looked disappointed.

"Is that right? Where is he now, then?"

"I suppose he's gone back to his place. He was living with someone, right? He told me that he crashed at my place because of an argument he had with his partner."

I hoped that I was acting normally, like a thirty something guy, talking

naturally about an old buddy. I had to appear that way. It would make it easier for me if I could cry, but I knew I wouldn't. If I were the sort of guy who was able to cry and show emotions, Wakasugi wouldn't have left. Although my eyes weren't beginning to water or anything, I tentatively pinched the skin between my eyes to hold back the tears I felt threatening.

"Noda?" Horikoshi asked, looking worried. "It's nothing," I said and removed my hand, forcing a smile.

I knew I couldn't cry, even though I so desperately wanted to. Was I feeling melancholic?

Even in this state of mind, I was detachedly analyzing myself. That realization made me feel a little fed up with myself.

Upon returning home, I saw that all the windows were dark. I sighed as I entered. There was nobody there to greet me. It was dark and utterly quiet inside the house. I'd thought that I had become used to being by myself since my wife left, but the truth was that after spending time with Wakasugi about, I now felt lonelier than ever.

Wakasugi may be back. There might be lights shining through the windows. For several days, I would kept up this vain hope as I walked home from the train station.

He had come to visit me for the first time in ten years and he had stayed in my house for about a month. Meeting him again had stirred up something that was long settled in the bottom of my heart. I could have lived on, completely forgetting those sediments existed. Now that they surfaced again, however, I was utterly obsessed with them. I find myself thinking of Wakasugi. Entirely out of the blue, I heard his voice deep inside my ears. I remembered the touch of his skin and the scent of his body. It's as if he is constantly somewhere inside of me. This was a new sensation for me.

I'd slept with Wakasugi during my college days. Even then, I'd never felt such an intense sense of intimacy. We had not been lovers. If we had been, I would have remembered him in a different way. I would have never felt guilty in front of Horikoshi. I'd been too afraid that my true sexuality would be revealed and so I'd tried to conceal it while satisfying my sexual desires with Wakasugi. Wakasugi had only served as an outlet for my lust. That had been selfish of me and I now I felt ashamed of it. My reunion with him after ten years, however, had made me realize that there was something I had missed then. There was something I hadn't quite grasped that lay within my own heart.

I loved him. It was love. All of a sudden ... or rather, inevitably, I had to admit it.

I didn't want to admit after ten long years. What good does it do now to know that I had had true feelings for the guy I'd slept with? I felt frustrated but, at the same time, I felt lucky. It doesn't do me much good to know now, but it's better to know than not knowing at all. At least, the knowledge can help fill some of the emptiness within me. I couldn't make it with my wife. I treated her well but I'd never loved her, so it's good that I have loved. Not having loved anybody at all would make me destitute.

I turned the lights on one by one in the dark house. I took off my suit in front of the closet in my bedroom. Afterwards, I went downstairs to the kitchen to gulp down a couple of glasses of water. I then took a shower and stood in front of the mirror above the sink.

Through my wet bangs, my face looked as white as a Noh mask, showing my fatigue. Since I hadn't had a trim recently, I looked just like I did in the olden days. My hollow eyes had the desperate look of someone about to drown. From whom was I to ask for help? I stared at myself in the mirror.

Does this look like the face of a thirty something man?

Am I simply trying to run back to the memories of my youth just because I can't take this loneliness? Would I feel the same way about Wakasugi even if everything had more or less gone according to plan with Naoko?

I went back to the kitchen and made a whiskey and water in a glass. Then I sat down at my desk in the corner of the living room, where my laptop was. Absently looking at the computer screen, I remembered the last time I had seen Wakasugi. It had been at night, a week after Wakasugi's lover had come to visit. It was the night before Wakasugi went back to his own place. He was drinking in the kitchen and I'd kissed him. Wakasugi was taken aback and asked, "Are you drunk?" I shook my head no, and Wakasugi looked down in thought.

"I think I'm a little buzzed," Wakasugi murmured. Then he looked at me with a frown. "Good night," he said and went to his room. The next morning, Wakasugi left before I'd awoken. He'd left me a note that read, "Thanks for everything."

Clearly, he had done it this way in order to avoid me. I felt devastated by the bluntness of his rejection but I didn't regret my actions. I'd finally admitted my true feelings by kissing him. I was in love and I was all too aware that there wouldn't be a happy ending.

Wakasugi took all of his belongings except for a sweat suit that he'd bought

to use as pyjamas His sweats had been put away with the futon in the closet. I found the sweats last night. I didn't know what to do. I couldn't bring myself to throw them away, so I brought them upstairs to my bedroom. I was lying down on my bed and asleep before I knew it. When I woke up to find myself lying on top of Wakasugi's sweats, I felt like I'd had a happy dream. It feels like I'm endlessly straying into that sweet dream. Looking at the computer screen, I opened the home page of the theater group Wakasugi belongs to. I searched for his name and intently read every piece of information about his plays and all the audience comments about them. I had had no interest in Wakasugi's doings while we were living together. As if to fill that void, I was now struggling desperately to know him better now that he's gone.

There were a few interviews featuring Wakasugi talking about the company's shows. Reading his words, sent out to the outside world, gave me a new realization. What he thought about and how he was evaluated by the public were all new to me. Checking the internet, I frequently saw Sakaguchi's name as well. Judging by the posted cast lists, Sakaguchi wasn't main character material. At best, Sakaguchi played occasional supporting roles. Despite the intimacy he shared with Wakasugi, Sakaguchi was not getting any special treatment. That bothered me a little.

Did it mean that Sakaguchi was living with Wakasugi with no ulterior motive? Did it mean that Sakaguchi was genuinely in love with Wakasugi? I tried to visualize Sakaguchi's earnest and serious look when he visited. My old boyfriend has a new and young lover, and he is that young lover.

I was frazzled from work but I just couldn't stop surfing the net until nearly midnight. Something exhilarating sparked within my head while I searched for the name "Wakasugi." My vision became blurry but I still couldn't stop myself from searching for more and more information about Wakasugi, even if I knew that it wouldn't get me anywhere.

Is this love? Is love so tiring?

Half possessed, I kept searching for "Wakasugi" on the screen.

It was the time of year that the spring personnel changes were unofficially announced at the bank I worked for. I wasn't in the targeted group for a transfer but I'd heard a rumor that the decision making process was a bit confused this year. One of my college senpais, Terauchi, worked at a different branch. One of my younger co-workers, Miyata, gave me the scoop that Terauchi was going to be demoted due to misconduct. During a personnel transfer in the banking

business, when you are promoted, you get transferred to a larger branch. Conversely, it is seen as a demotion when you are transferred to a branch smaller than the one you're currently working at.

At the end of day, Miyata came to me and asked, "Shall we go for a drink tonight?" He took me to the kind of fancy restaurant that we wouldn't normally go to. It had a very elaborate interior as the restaurant was very chic and posh. It was a nice place to have a private talk, which of course came with a corresponding price. I understood I was paying the price for the detailed knowledge of the scandal. Miyata was a rather shrewd young fellow.

"Looks like Terauchi-san's got this," Miyata revealed, smacking his lips.

"What's this?"

Miyata grinned and said, "Oh please, Noda-san. Don't act like such a saint. This of course means a woman."

I remembered Terauchi-senpai's face. He was an earnest man who was pushy enough to survive in a relatively conservative organization such as a bank. He was a top up-and-comer and married to his superior's daughter, just like the achiever's text book says to do. I would have never imagined that he'd fall from the corporate ladder because of a scandal involving a woman.

"They say he had an affair with a girl in the same branch. Why did he pick a girl from inside the company? He should have picked somebody from outside if he wanted to fool around a little."

"Are you sure about that?"

"An anonymous memo circulated around. Terauchi-san is an elite, you know. Somebody successfully dragged him down."

Miyata had a connection within the personnel department, so his story was credible.

"Are you okay, Noda-san?"

"What do you mean?"

"I understand that you're separated from your wife. Are you still talking to her?"

There was a time that a divorce had an effect on one's personnel evaluation. But nowadays, with so many divorces, it didn't have that much effect any more.

"It wasn't because of an affair with a girl that my wife left me."

I'd never told anyone that she left me because we didn't have any children. But everybody knew that was the main reason.

"I know, I know. Nobody suspects that Noda-san would do such a thing. But I never thought Terauchi-san would fall into such a scandal, either. Noda-

san, you'd better be careful. You'll enter the dangerous zone of the mid-thirties in a few years yourself."

"What does it have to do with age?"

"Terauchi-san is 37 or 38, I think. It seems that the men are in a danger zone, just before they turn forty. They say that it's the 'afternoon of life' when you get past forty, right? So some men start asking themselves, 'Am I doing okay with my life so far? Isn't there anything I have left undone?' Then some think to find their answers with women."

I nodded, thinking that it'd make my life so much easier if I had a relationship with a woman. Then I remembered how frantically I had searched for "Wakasugi" on the Internet. A self-mocking smile began to form on my face. I don't know how Miyata interpreted it, but he twisted his lips ironically.

"You seem so relaxed, Noda-san. Your wife has just left your newly built home. Still, it doesn't seem like it has gotten to you too much."

"You must have been laughing at me behind my back on that subject, right? I am not an elite up-and-comer like Terauchi-san so it doesn't matter that much anyway."

"You're not serious, are you?" Miyata snickered. He had a glint in his eyes that carried a hint of spitefulness. Horikoshi had also jokingly said, "We did talk about your marriage problems quite a bit for awhile whenever we got together." But this was different. Miyata must be gossiping about my marriage with our other co-workers with a very different purpose in mind. It's not that people all have ill intentions. I'd heard several rumors that had become twisted simply by being repeated by too many different people. I wasn't expecting to be immune from such distorted gossip. Miyata would have thought of me as an available topic of discussion when he went out drinking with the others. I knew that, but I was fine drinking with Miyata now. People who like gossiping are all this way. I myself was treating him like a news source, so Miyata and I were of the same breed. I hadn't wanted to have anything to do with anybody when I was younger. I didn't want anyone else to influence me, nor did I feel any desire to influence others. That had been my wish, but the reality was that I found myself in my thirties, caked with an emotional grime that I couldn't remove. I had to admit that reality.

The afternoon of life. Normally, I would have let Miyata's phrase go in one ear and out the other. But, to my surprise, it echoed within the depths of my mind. On the way home, after drinking with Miyata, I thought I could come to terms with my feelings. It's the afternoon of life past forty. Crossing an intersection there, it becomes totally understandable for us to ask ourselves

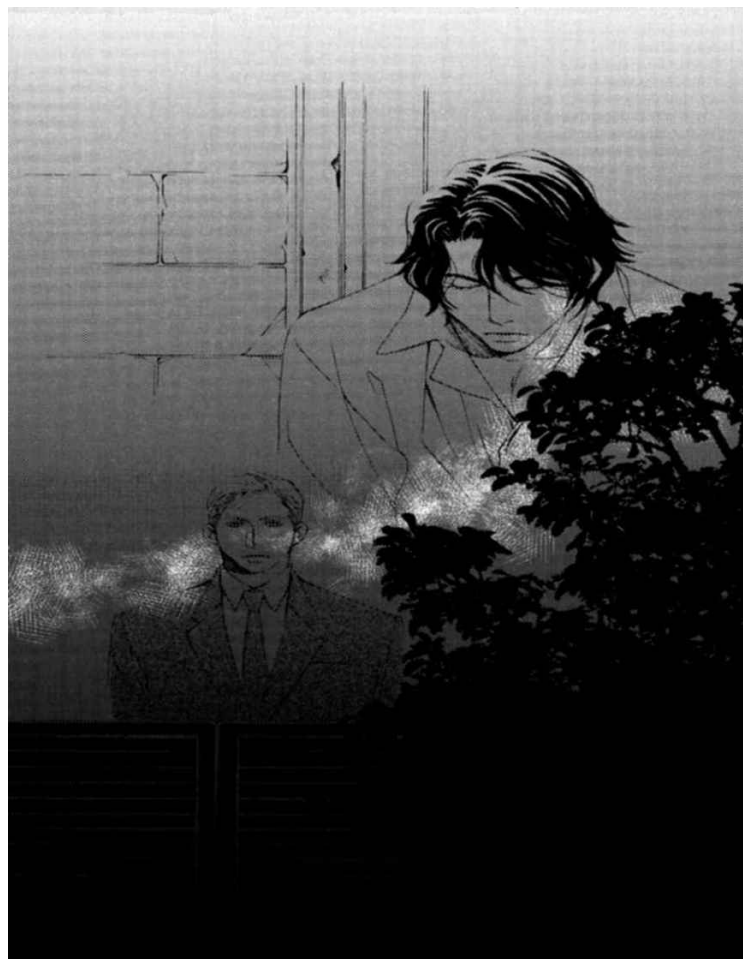
whether we are doing okay in our lives or not. I was keenly aware of the fact that time flows much more swiftly these days. At this rate, I would be in my late thirties and then in my forties before I knew it. That reality hasn't hit me just yet, but I've become old enough to think about the future.

My reunion with Wakasugi at this particular time might have been a great opportunity for me to reflect about my future. It wasn't an opportunity to start over. It was an opportunity to get some closure so that I wouldn't dwell on the past too much. I'd loved that man when I was younger. That hasn't changed. That's that.

I could love someone. There was a beautiful place inside me. I wasn't hoping that he would love me back. I simply decided not to deny my feelings, not to deny the place I had for him. It would always be there. I simply wasn't planning on doing anything with it. When I came to this conclusion, the fog that had lingered in my head for several days swiftly cleared.

It was only natural for Wakasugi not to respond to my kiss that night. He must have thought that I was crazy. I wanted to laugh out loud, but at the same time, I felt a pain from the very bottom of my heart. I knew I could tolerate the pain, that I could get over it somehow. I knew I would regain my composure and again be able to analyze myself objectively. That was what was going through my mind until I returned home. The moment I opened the gate, I became helplessly confused again.

There was a man, squatting down in front of my door, as if he was asleep. He looked so vulnerable as he leaned against the door with his eyes closed. Under the warm light of the entrance, his well-defined features were even more pronounced, with sharp contrasts between the light and shadow. He looked just like a well-crafted sculpture. And he looked so peaceful, like he was having a sweet dream. I would have loved to keep him as a beautiful ornament by the entrance, if only he had truly been an immovable object d'art.



As it was, I just stood there without even being able to speak to him. He must have sensed my return and opened his eyes, startled.

"... Hi." Wakasugi saw me and stood up, with a natural smile. He looked as if he was still in the caught up dream he'd been having.

"You're home late. Did you go out drinking? I was afraid you wouldn't come home tonight. I was cursing my bad timing."

There had been nights when I'd thought it would be nice to come home and find the lights on inside the house. But I'd never imagined finding a man waiting for me by the front door at midnight. I took out the key to the front door without saying anything.

"... Should I not have come?" he asked, as if reading my mind. "No, it's okay." I managed to reply, shaking my head. Then I opened the door.

"You wanted to talk about something with me, right? Just help yourself to a drink. I'll go change my clothes."

I invited him in and Wakasugi gestured his understanding. As Wakasugi entered the living room, I ran up the stairs, then into my bedroom. As soon as I closed the door behind me, I nearly collapsed. I took a deep breath to calm myself, took off my suit jacket and hung it up in the closet. When I tried to remove my tie, I noticed that my fingers were trembling. How pathetic. I managed to take off my tie and to get my shirt unbuttoned before flopping down onto my bed. My strength was drained, as if I was really was drunk. I didn't want to move as I wasn't all that confident that I could go downstairs and talk to Wakasugi calmly. I didn't know how I should explain my kiss the other night. Was it possible for me to simply pretend that nothing had ever happened?

I was feeling at a loss when I heard the door, which was left ajar, move slightly. I looked up to see Wakasugi standing in the doorway.

"What's wrong? Not feeling well?"

"I'm not ... feeling well."

I couldn't continue. I brushed my disheveled bangs out of my eyes with my hand and then lowered my head once more. Seeing that I wasn't moving, Wakasugi stepped away from the door and went downstairs without a word.

He's gone. I felt relief for a single brief moment that went away when I heard his footsteps coming back up the stairs almost right away. Wakasugi was holding a glass of water in his hand.

"Drink this."

He held out the glass and I took it amenably. Once I wet my lips, my awkward sense of tension mysteriously melted away. Gazing downwards, I mumbled while holding the empty glass tightly on my lap.

"... You're so kind."

I knew this. Wakasugi was a sweet guy. I've known it for a long time. I wondered, however, if I'd ever acknowledged to myself the fact that Wakasugi was a "sweet guy." I recognized him as a handsome guy. I'd even thought once that he was the promiscuous type. I'd thought that was the reason he'd become so deeply involved with a guy like me. Horikoshi had said, "He is very emotional and sensitive," but I had never really tried to understand that side of him.

I thought I loved Wakasugi. But what was it that I liked about him? Was I in love with an image I'd created? I didn't understand the subtle nuances of love relationships. I was an initiate, a complete and utter novice.

"Sorry, but I'm really not feeling well. I must have had too much drink."

I put my hand over my forehead and lowered my head.

"Seems like it. You don't look so good."

I was expecting to hear him say, "Maybe I'd better get going." But even after he'd heard that I wasn't feeling well, Wakasugi didn't move. For awhile, we both stayed silent with our heads down. It was like a kid's game of "Who can stay quiet the longest?" I lost.

"So ... what did you want?"

"When I left the last time, I didn't have the chance to properly thank you for your hospitality. And I was also wondering how you were doing."

"Same old, same old here. Hanging in there."

"Looks that way. Have you squared things away with your wife?"

I wanted to scream at him. What was he talking about? Had he waited for me in front of the house just to talk about my wife?

"My wife was rather excited and upset when she called the other day. I explained the situation to her later and she cooled down. I told her that you left after her phone call. Then she said, 'What I said was rude to your friend.' She felt bad about it. I'm sorry you got in the middle of our mess."

"And I am sorry to get you in the middle of our mess. You know, with Naoki making a surprise visit and all. That caught you totally off guard, didn't it?"

Hearing an unfamiliar name, I instinctively looked up. Naoki? Naoki Sakaguchi? It was reasonable for me to apologize for Naoko. But Wakasugi shouldn't apologize for Naoki. "It was okay. Your problems are none of my business anyway," I responded rather strongly. Wakasugi grinned wryly.

"You're right. I know it's none of your concern but I just wanted to apologize. I also want to report that I have broken up with Naoki. We talked it

over and he moved out. I should have let him go much sooner for his sake. It wasn't doing him any good to be with me. He's an actor, and as such, he should be more ambitious. But all he wanted to do lately was fill up all my private time to the exclusion of everything else. He wasn't like that in the beginning. I guess I provided him a refuge." Even if he didn't quite make it as an actor, he'd wanted to be Wakasugi's lover. I didn't see anything wrong with that. He must have been a good lover. What was Wakasugi complaining about? I railed at him bitterly in my mind.

"Sorry but ... today isn't ..."

I was afraid of losing control and saying things I shouldn't say. So I looked down again. But Wakasugi didn't show any signs of leaving. "I promise that I won't be any trouble. Can I crash here tonight?"

I glanced at my watch. He could make the last train, just barely, but it wasn't nice to make someone leave after they had waited for you. Besides, the next day was my day off. There was no reason to say no.

"You can sleep in the tatami mat room downstairs. You know where to find the futon, right? Make yourself at home."

"Thanks."

Wakasugi didn't make any nasty remarks about my sharp tone, and quickly turned around. I was frustrated with myself. Wakasugi had come to tell me that it was all over with his young lover. Wasn't there anything else that I should say to him?

"Wakasugi," I suddenly called out and Wakasugi turned around in the doorway. Our eyes met. Feeling tense, I swallowed nervously. "... Did you ... really break up with Sakaguchi-kun?"

"Yes."

"You said that you were providing him a refuge. What about him? What kind of refuge was he providing you?"

Wakasugi's face twisted.

"... He looked like you."

I wasn't prepared for that. I looked at him, stunned. Wakasugi kept his gaze on me and approached me one step at a time. I saw something shimmering in his eyes. I didn't know what it was; I didn't know if it was hot or cold. But there was something and it shimmered like a flame.

"Look at you."

Standing in front of me while I remained seated on bed, Wakasugi smiled with a strange expression still. "I don't know what to do, seeing you like that. I just wanted to see you."

...
...

How did I look anyway? Was the way I looked something that would have dismayed him?

Wakasugi leaned down toward me, still smiling, and looked into my face.

"I can't stand it."

So how did I look? I was sure that I looked awful. I probably would have to look away if I saw my face in the mirror. It was fortunate that I didn't have to, but I could only imagine the way I looked. Surely, I looked the same as I did in the mirror the other night. I felt like I was drowning and begging the man in front of my eyes for help.

"I was quite surprised when you kissed me the other day. How did you think I would feel after that? I broke up with Naoki. So ... I ..."

Wakasugi used to say, "I don't two-time." So, he went to finish things with his lover before coming back to me? What did he ...?

Our gazes intertwined and something shimmering in his eyes burst.

Wakasugi quickly grabbed my shoulders and kissed me. Under his weight, I collapsed back onto the bed. He pinned both of my arms down and crawled on top of me. He was breathing hard and his breath felt hot and wild. He hungrily covered my lips with his, like a carnivorous animal biting its prey. I let myself be devoured.

"... Ungh ..."

Wakasugi caressed me all over, pulled my shirt out of my pants, and rolled it up to expose my chest. He rubbed my nipples and pinched them between his fingers. Wakasugi then sucked on my nipples while rubbing off against my groin through my pants.

"Ahh ..."

It was a sensation that I hadn't felt for several years and my body arched from the pleasure. I was surprised to find out that I could still moan like this.

"... Sto ..."

Wakasugi jumped up and took off his shirt. He must have been working out, because his body compared favorably to the way it was in his twenties. As soon as I saw his well-toned and finely-muscled body, I felt embarrassed.

"Wait a minute."

His eyes full of lust were staring at me as if to say, "What is it?"

"Do you really want to do this? How long do you think it's been since. I ..."

It had been ten years. Things were now very different from the time we had last made love. The emotions may have stayed the same but not everything

could. I felt completely insecure about how I would look to his eyes. Wakasugi smiled teasingly. He traced the lines of my body and poked at my nipple.

"This hasn't changed much. Your nipples are still pretty and a soft pink. When I sucked them they tasted good."

I blushed. I looked away to hide my face and whispered, "Please, stop."

I was trying to sit up in an attempt to escape when Wakasugi locked me in a full nelson from behind. He reached in front and removed the belt from my pants.

"... I totally want to do this. Let me prove it to you."

Wakasugi reached in through my open zipper while licking my clitoris.

"... Ooh"

My underwear was pulled down and my ass cheeks were exposed. I felt Wakasugi's engorged cock nestling between my bare cheeks through his pants.

"Noda ..."

Wakasugi pressed his groin hard in an almost lewd move as if to show off the hardness and size of his manhood. His hands were stroking my chest slowly. He pinched, flicked, and rubbed my nipples, fiddling with their now hardened nubs.

"Unnghh ..."

"See? Just like before. ... They are so ..."

Wakasugi fondled my chest and stroked my cock relentlessly with his hands. I twisted my body in response to the teasing movements of his fingers.

"I think you are more responsive than before. Can't you take it any more ...?"

I heard myself breathing hard but it seemed like the sound of my breathing was coming from afar. What had been suppressed for so long overflowed. I wasn't quite sure if I was falling down or going up. I simply had a floating sensation that left me not knowing or caring about up and down. As that happened, I bucked uncontrollably and came.

Wakasugi scooped up my come carefully and smeared it around my hole. It was tightly shut as if it had forgotten how to take a man inside.

"No, you can't. Not ... there ..."

I was saying no, but I also felt something stirring in my body. Something carnal with the texture of honey. Before I knew it, I was shifting my position at his prompts and thrusting my bottom out to meet his movements. Before long, Wakasugi's hard cock was mercilessly penetrating my tight hole.

"Ow ... no ..."

I was concentrating intently on the area which connected Wakasugi and I.

Nothing else mattered. Wakasugi kept moving hard and fast, as if there would be no tomorrow. He was acting as if letting this wild heat out his system was the only thing in the universe that mattered.

It felt as if the whole world had simply disappeared, everything except for the sound of our harsh breaths. I knew that when he reached his peak, I would probably shudder in fear of losing my own existence.

"... Ahh ..."

I let out a deep sigh. I wasn't quite sure if that was an expression of my pleasure, or my fear of oblivion. Soon I gave up on thinking altogether and became a mere object swaying back and forth on the bed.

I woke up to the ticklish sensation of a man's rough chin touching my throat. Wakasugi was cuddling up to me like a cat. A man in his thirties, acting like a kid. With a frown, I looked over at the man next to me to find Wakasugi's head twitching. It took me a while to realize that he was giggling.

"What are you giggling to yourself about?" I asked him, as I checked the clock by the bed. It was past eleven in the morning. It looked like the weather was fine and I could see sunlight streaming in through the curtains. I don't remember when we fell asleep, but my body had been wiped clean and a comforter had been neatly placed over me.

Wakasugi looked up at me and asked teasingly, "What are these?" He looked at me closely. When he lifted up his upper body, Wakasugi's pair of sweats that I'd brought into my bed were revealed.

"These are mine, right? Why are they here? Were you wearing them as pyjamas? Or were you holding these when you went to sleep, in place of me?"

If he had pointed this out last night, I would have been pathetically stunned. But this was morning, so I remained composed.

"That's what you were laughing about? Is it that funny?"

"I would have never thought that you would do such a thing, Noda."

Wakasugi shoved the sweats at me.

That wasn't like me. He was right. I might seem to be a calm and rational person, but underneath that façade, I was a chaotic person who couldn't even figure out how I was actually feeling. My world had always been that way. Today, however, things were different.

"Why would you think I wouldn't do things like this? Is it funny if I do this? You laugh at me for yearning for your warmth? You didn't even think it a possibility that I liked you so very much?"

Wakasugi stopped laughing and looked at me dumbfounded.

"I never expected ... anything like this coming from you, Noda."

It was a topsy turvy kind of world. Everything was clear in this new world. It was so clear to me: What I wanted and what I desired. I wanted this man in front of me. Everything else faded in importance in comparison to him.

Wakasugi leaned over to me again. He caressed my forehead and moved his face closer.

"Do you like me?"

I looked away quickly. But he wasn't letting me go so easily.

"C'mon. You like me, huh? You just said so yourself."

"You laughed. I don't care any more."

"Don't act so cold."

Wakasugi kissed my ear and said, "I was giggling because I was happy."

His hand was crawling over my chest. I held his hand and said, "Stop."

"Why?"

"It's morning. I don't want to do it, not when it's so bright."

"You never cared about that before. You used to be bolder and I was the one who was shy."

"Things are different now. You may feel okay about it, but I ... I have changed quite a bit, haven't I?"

Wakasugi looked surprised and then smiled suggestively.

"No, you haven't. You've got a nice body. Your skin's smooth. It's fair and soft. Makes it easy to leave a hickey. I like having sex with you. It feels so good. Do you have any idea how much pleasure you give to a man?"

"Stop saying that."

"It's true. You felt how ravenously I made love last night. You realized that, didn't you? Wasn't it hard on you, though? I had a great night, but wasn't it a little painful for you? It felt like your ass remembered the shape of my dick, though. It was a perfect fit, milking me ..."

Wakasugi reached for the place he dug into so deeply last night, and I resisted for real.

"Stop it. You've had your young boyfriend, but I haven't slept with anyone like this for a long time. Don't tease me like this."

Wakasugi drew back his hand meekly. I tried to look away as he pulled me closer. He then rocked me, holding my body as if cradling me. He nuzzled my hair just like he used to. I pouted and let myself go limp.

"... I didn't know you were worried about that, Noda."

"You don't know anything about me."

"Maybe I don't."

When I looked up at him, Wakasugi was smiling slightly but he looked hurt. I could see it in his eyes. Whether you knew someone or not was a factual matter to me. But to him, it may be a different matter altogether. He might feel as if I was denying our whole relationship by saying he didn't know me. *See? Even the way we interpret the word "to know" alone, shows we are so different ...*

"I don't know anything about you either, Wakasugi."

During the short period that we'd lived together, I hadn't even been interested in what kind of performances Wakasugi worked on. Physically we were together, but Wakasugi had only been a man that I slept with. I didn't have any other way of seeing him. It had been as if his personality didn't hold any substance, so to speak, but the man right next to me now was real and had the weight of a real person. It must have been a self-defence mechanism. I hadn't wanted to know anything about Wakasugi before, because I hadn't wanted to get hurt when I lost him. But now, I didn't care about getting hurt. I wanted all of him. A single strand of his hair, a piece of a word he uttered that I missed. Everything.

"It's not too late. Tell me about yourself."

Wakasugi gazed at me. He couldn't believe what he'd just heard.

"Waka—"

Wakasugi abruptly held my arms tight and pressed his lips against mine as if in a trance.

"I'll tell you anything that you want to know."

Seen close up, his eyes had a dreamy fever within them. He kissed me again, which transferred the fever to me. This fever was changing me. I wasn't myself any more in what I said and did, all because of Wakasugi. What had been suppressed until then came bursting out last night. I hadn't felt quite sure then if I was falling down or rising up, but now I knew. Feeling his weight resting upon me, I knew that I was falling. Pretty soon, I would be held fast, with all four of my limbs and every little corner of my heart captured by this man.

Wakasugi whispered, "I love you," in a very low voice. "You are special to me. I don't know why. It's not like we were together for a long time. I actually have some bad memories, too. And I never felt that you actually liked me even when we were together. But I can tell you this, I was always looking for you, no matter whom I was going out with."

I hadn't been as straightforward earlier because of my stubbornness.

"Noda, ... I like you." Wakasugi'd told me that repeatedly. He'd forgiven me for my guile. He is sweet and he expresses his feelings without reservation. He is the total opposite of me. It would be scary to be pulled into his feelings. That's what I had always thought, that he and I were incompatible, because he lived by a different logic than mine. I was trying to protect my world by running away from his feelings. But now ...

"When I kissed you like this, saying 'I love you,' you used to hate that. Remember that, Noda?"

I remembered. I had been a cold person. That kind of bloodless reaction could hurt another's feelings. I had thought I'd known, but I'd had no idea how much it truly did.

"You won't refuse me any longer, huh?"

Wakasugi looked into my eyes, as if checking. Instead of replying, I looked back at him.

"I like being loving and gentle."

Wakasugi's expression softened and he looked like a purring cat. He put his body on top of mine and I felt his rough chin caressing my neck.

"This feels so good. This is what I always wanted. Being with you in this way ..."

Wakasugi started coming over to my place whenever he had the chance but he only stayed overnight on weekends. He probably didn't want to disturb my regular schedule during the work week. Even when he spent the night, he would only spend one night at a time. That might be because he was worried about what Naoko would say. I didn't care much what other people thought about Wakasugi and me. I was preoccupied with the renewed love I had found. I was sure Wakasugi felt the same way. One Friday, he sent me an e-mail saying, "I'm coming over now." But Wakasugi didn't show up until almost 1:00 a.m. It looked like he'd had some drinks at the opening night party he'd gone to, and he was little buzzed. As soon as he came inside, Wakasugi said, "Give me a glass of water." Then he collapsed at the dining table.

"Here ..."

I offered the glass of water which he gulped down. Wakasugi finally got his second wind and then looked at me.

"Anything new with you, Noda?"

"No, nothing in particular. I've been kind of busy this week."

This is something I've noticed lately. Whenever I'd see Wakasugi after an

absence, he'd first gaze at me so that he wouldn't miss any subtle changes in me, then he'd always ask, "Anything new with you?"

Maybe he had gazed at me this way when we lived together in the past. After all, he had told me that living together was a good way to keep an eye out, to make sure that his lover wasn't having an affair. But I could no longer remember the way Wakasugi used to look at me. I hadn't really paid attention to him then, except during our lovemaking. Now, ten years later, I feel guilty whenever I notice his gaze. At the same time, though, I feel the pangs of love for him.

Wakasugi lowered his head and curled up the corner of his mouth.

"What's funny?"

"... Um ... Noda, whenever I see you, I'm afraid you are going to say, 'I'm worried about my public image. So I've decided to get back together with my wife.'"

"That's nonsense."

There's no way I'd ever get back together with Naoko. At least, none that I can conceive of. Yet, I couldn't categorically deny it for him. With ordinary friends like Horikoshi, I can easily say, "Our divorce is inevitable." After I started sleeping with Wakasugi, however, I began to parse my words subconsciously. Was it because I was afraid of betraying him somehow? Was I worried about that? Or was it because I didn't expect that a relationship between two men to last for a long time?

"Wakasugi, aren't you stretching yourself by coming over here? I'm sure you must sleep better at your own place." I shifted the subject away from my marriage.

Wakasugi opened his eyes wide in surprise.

"I'm not stretching myself too thin. Why would it be tiring for me to come see you, Noda? I make eleventh-hour efforts only because I have the prospect of seeing you later. I can go the extra mile even when I feel totally exhausted, so long as I can look forward to making love to you."

"... You're drunk."

"I'd say the same thing even sober."

Wakasugi abruptly got up and hugged me. He then leaned against me.

"Can we do it? Just like this, right here ...?"

"... You are drunk."

He let go easily when I pushed him away. But he immediately wrapped his arms around me again.

"I'm not that drunk. Just pretending to be drunk, because it makes it easier to

touch you.”

Wakasugi whispered in my ear. I wasn't quite sure if he was serious or joking.

“Don't be ridiculous ...”

“Noda, I can't wait to make love to you. I want to see the lascivious you in bed. But you are always reset to that serious guy whenever I see you. That's why I get worried that you may be getting back together with your wife. If that's the case, I am making a fool out of myself by trying to seduce you.”

“So you just want to skip the seduction?”

“I usually love all the foreplay. I must be really tired.”

Wakasugi's fingers caressed my body and felt moist and hot wherever they touched. He was stroking my back and then his hand moved down to cup my behind. It felt like he was massaging me as he caressed through my pants.

“Then keep pretending to be drunk.”

I pushed away Wakasugi and made him sit down on a chair.

“Are you mad at me?”

Wakasugi tried to apologize but I wouldn't listen. I squatted down in front of him and unzipped his fly.

“You're too drunk to move, right? Sit still.”

“Hey, Noda.”

“You know what to do in order to make me lascivious. Say it. Tell me to 'suck.' ... Order me.”

Wakasugi was perplexed and then bitter. I was just leading him on jokingly. Seeing his unexpected reaction flustered me.

“I ... don't wanna treat you badly, Noda. I only want to be gentle with you.”

Obviously, Wakasugi wasn't only talking about sex. I was stunned and speechless for a short while.

“... I know that.”

I felt a subtle emotional pang but it was one that held an element of sweetness to it.

“I don't wanna force you if you don't want it. I'm not asking you to treat me badly. I'm not asking you to do what we used to do. I just want you to do things, things that make you feel good.”

I placed my forehead on Wakasugi's knee. I took his cock out of his underwear and blew softly upon its tip. In vain, Wakasugi told me to stop. I placed my lips upon his cock, feeling the velvety steel press of it but remained still without moving my lips. I looked up at him as if asking him silently, “So,

what do you want me to do?" Wakasugi sighed, his expression distorted in anguish.



"You ... pervert."

"You tried to skip the seduction. You said you looked forward to making love to me. That feeling is mutual. I've been ... waiting for you, too."

Wakasugi softened his expression and patted my head.

My fingers stroked the length that was held in my hand. Wakasugi grabbed my head tightly, and my nose was pushed against his crotch.

"... Suck my dick."

I immediately put it in my mouth. I wrapped my tongue around it while sucking. Wakasugi grew harder in swift reaction.

"... Ugh ..."

Wakasugi pushed my head harder and his cock slipped deeper into my throat.

"C'mon... Harder. Use your tongue."

I kept sucking Wakasugi's cock as I unzipped my own fly. I was sucking Wakasugi's cock, but my own dick was already hard and hot. I used my other hand to stroke myself.

"... Noda ... Noda."

Wakasugi urgently pushed my head away. He grabbed my arm and harshly said, "Sit on me."

He pulled down my pants, which then fell about my feet. Wakasugi was still in the chair and I sat down on him with my bottom bared. Wakasugi pulled up my shirt and nibbled on my nipples. At the same time, he reached down and I felt Wakasugi's engorged flesh nudge against the star of my opening.

"... I think we need some lubricant ..." I suggested but it turned out to be unnecessary. Wakasugi had slid his finger in and my hole was already twitching in yearning for something hotter than his finger.

"Wakasugi ... Ahh!" I screamed and put my arms around Wakasugi's neck to hold him tight at the moment he entered me. Wakasugi placed his arms around my waist, penetrating me even more deeply.

"Noda, ... move around. You can move more, can't you?"

"... Aah ... no ..."

"See, you are so hard here and down here," Wakasugi said, pinching my nipple and holding my engorged dick really tight. He then licked my earlobe.

"Ungh ..."

I was deeply connected to Wakasugi. Deeper than anyone else. A thought went through my head, screaming wistfully. I love this man. I don't have any reservations. I won't make the same mistake again. I'm not going to lose him. It has become clear to me but ...

I felt ripples of apprehension beginning to creep up. I held onto Wakasugi's neck tighter and swiveled my hips, in an attempt to shake off my anxiety.

"Noda-san, you are in a good mood today."

I was getting ready to leave work when Miyata spoke to me.

"Why are you in such a hurry? Have you got a date? Or has your wife returned?"

I got up from my seat, smiling wryly. "Neither," I told him.

Since I'd started spending my weekends with Wakasugi, I no longer hung out that much with my co-workers. I could easily imagine them gossiping at a bar saying, "Noda-san is finally getting a divorce," or "Noda-san must have gotten a new girlfriend."

Wakasugi and I began to worry about possible rumors going around in my neighborhood. It's one thing to have a friend staying with me for personal reasons such as being homeless, but it's totally different if a male friend my age simply sleeps over every single weekend. Naoko knows quite a few people in our neighborhood. Who knows what they might be saying now? So tonight, I was going over to Wakasugi's place instead. It might be better if we saw each other less frequently, but I couldn't bear to bring that up. Wakasugi was trying to make time for me despite his busy schedule. It would have been easier for him if we lived together like before. That way, we'd see each other more often even though we have different working hours. Every weekend that he sleeps over, I find myself afraid that Wakasugi will one day start talking about moving back into my house. If only I didn't still have Naoko, I thought from time to time. We've separated but Naoko has never actually mentioned the word "divorce," so it didn't feel right for me to bring up the subject for my own personal convenience.

"... Noda-san."

Someone called me as I was going down the stairs to the subway station. The voice sounded unfamiliar but I turned around. I saw a young man with a cap on. His face was half hidden and I didn't recognize him immediately. He was also wearing clothes which were quite different from what he had on when I last saw him.

"It's Sakaguchi. I brought Wakasugi-san's stuff to your house before ..."

Naoki Sakaguchi took off his cap and smiled. It was Wakasugi's ex-boyfriend. His hair was now a much brighter shade of brown. He'd looked serious and quiet before but now he gave off a quite different impression due to

his hair and clothes.

"Oh ... Sorry. I didn't recognize you for a second."

"I borrowed these clothes from a friend. I'm crashing at his place now and he told me these clothes looked good on me."

Sakaguchi definitely looked more stylish after having left Wakasugi's place. At the same time, he looked harder, which bothered me. I didn't think it was by pure chance that Sakaguchi happened to meet me.

"I was actually waiting for you, Noda-san. I have something I wanna tell you. Do you have a minute?"

Wakasugi had told me that he would probably be working late so there was still some time before I was supposed to be at his place. I had a bad feeling about this, but I took Sakaguchi to a nearby café anyway. Why did Sakaguchi look somewhat somber despite the fact he was more fashionable? I must have been staring at him while wondering about all this. Sakaguchi stroked his brown hair shyly as we sat down across the table from each other.

"Do I look like one of those Jonnys' Talents? I never had my hair such a bright color before because Wakasugi-san didn't like it. I don't like flashy clothes, either. ... But this style is more popular with the customers."

"You mean, the audiences for your plays?"

"No, the patrons in Ni-chome," Sakaguchi casually said and looked at me, trying to judge my feelings.

I brought the coffee cup to my mouth without making any remark. A cold bead of sweat ran down my back but I managed to prevent my fingers from trembling.

"It's my part-time job. I used to do it a little before, and I just started back again recently. The hours are flexible and that's convenient for me. ... You really don't change your facial expressions that much, Noda-san. You look completely average. I can easily picture you as a gentle and quiet young father, holding your child's hand in a shopping mall on a Sunday. Of course, those ordinary people wouldn't know what Ni-chome is all about."

"I don't have any kids."

"I know. And you are currently separated from your wife. Been married for four years. You met your wife at an after party for your friend's wedding. Your wife is beautiful, by the way. She looks so peaceful and pure. She seems to be a similar type to yourself, Noda-san. You like women who are similar to you?"

My eyes opened wide. Had he heard this from Wakasugi? I suspected that for a split second before I realized that it was impossible. I had never told Wakasugi how I'd met my wife.

"A friend of mine works at a private detective agency. The information is accurate, isn't it? I had him run a check on you."

"... What for?"

I struggled to interrogate him. Sakaguchi shot me a cold look in return.

"You're not just Wakasugi-san's friend. You guys are dating, aren't you? Did your wife leave you because of that? You know, you have a nice job at a bank. And your wife ran away from you because you had an affair with a man. What will people say about that when they find out?"

"I have no idea what you are talking about. Why are you saying all this to me anyway?"

Sakaguchi pretended he didn't hear me and kept talking.

"The story doesn't have to be credible, you know. But what kind of effect would such a rumor have on you? I know some people say that your wife became emotionally unstable because she couldn't get pregnant. I think it'd be far more interesting if there's an additional rumor out there saying that the couple didn't have kids because the husband was a secret homosexual."

"... Cut it out. Are you trying to blackmail me? It's just speculation which is totally unfounded."

I managed not to raise my voice, but that was all the control I could muster. My face must have shown the emotional jolt.

"Unfounded or not, that kind of talk would still inflict some damage, wouldn't it?" Sakaguchi pointed out firmly. He probably knew what was going through my mind.

"I've been thinking, Noda-san. I never demanded anything from Wakasugi-san while we were together. I was a very low-maintenance lover for him. I'm sure Wakasugi-san would have done anything for me that I asked. ... Precisely because of that, though, I didn't want to cause him any trouble. But this is outrageous. I can't believe that Wakasugi-san broke up with me for you."

I knew this was a false accusation. It hadn't been working out between Wakasugi and Sakaguchi first, long before Wakasugi and I got back together. I didn't cause their breakup.

"You probably should talk to Wakasugi about these sort of things. They're none of my business."

"But they are. After all, you stole Wakasugi-san away from me, didn't you?" Sakaguchi insisted with a sharp voice.

"Noda-san, at first I thought you were simply Wakasugi-san's type. My face looks quite similar to yours, don't you think, Noda-san? When I first met you, it all added up. 'This must be Wakasugi-san's new boyfriend. This man is totally

Wakasugi-san's type,' I thought to myself. I was convinced of it. But as it turns out, I was wrong. It wasn't that you were Wakasugi-san's type. It was you that Wakasugi-san loved all along. That's why Wakasugi-san likes men who are similar to you. Isn't that right? You were together during college, weren't you? I asked Wakasugi-san if he thought you and I looked alike. 'You look like Noda when he was younger,' he answered."

Sakaguchi spoke calmly at first, but his voice broke as he continued. "Can you imagine? It was like hearing Wakasugi-san say, 'You were a stand-in all along,' when we broke up. How the fuck should I take such an insult?" Sakaguchi yelled, abruptly slamming the table. The other customers nearby quickly turned to us with stunned looks.

"You stole Wakasugi-san and ... the years of my youth ... that I wasted on Wakasugi-san. You have to take responsibility for all that."

As I heard Sakaguchi's threats, I wondered if he was selling himself in Ni-chrome. I wondered if he was being self-destructive, falling to the lowest depths in an attempt to fill up his emptiness. Sakaguchi was fundamentally only whining, not yet able to get into character as an extortionist fully. I thought that Sakaguchi just needed an outlet to express his anger and frustrations upon. I didn't think he was a real threat. However, he had mentioned a private detective agency, which I thought was kind of real. And despair can make cowards courageous, so that even though Sakaguchi seemed to be acting childishly, I had to take his threats somewhat seriously.

"Do you hear what you are saying? Whatever went on between you and Wakasugi is none of my business. It was your decision to have a relationship with Wakasugi. It was all up to you whether or not you went out with Wakasugi or to break up with him. Why should that be any of my concern?"

I was aware that I had played a big part in their drama, but I was not going to admit it.

"But ... if only you hadn't come along ..."

Sakaguchi was not dumb. When I reasoned with him, he knew he couldn't keep making his wild accusations. He sagged down with his fists clenched, like a child being scolded by his teacher. I thought of Naoko while watching his trembling head. What would she say if she found out that I wanted to get a divorce because I couldn't love women? Would she demand the lost years back like Sakaguchi just did? The years she wasted on me?

I'd had a vague premonition but it suddenly took on a clearer shape. I thought I could disregard it any time I wanted, but now I knew it wasn't that easy. I became keenly aware of the weight of its reality, which made me

shudder. I had a vision of Sakaguchi merging with an image of Naoko. I had to close my eyes.

"... I want you to break up with Wakasugi-san. Noda-san, you are married, right? Then it doesn't have to be Wakasugi-san for you. But for me, it has to be him."

Sakaguchi was now pleading. It sounded like a sad scream. I finally knew all too well what my premonition was.

"You're late. Did you have a busy day?"

I got to Wakasugi's place much later than we had agreed, but Wakasugi greeted me calmly.

"You haven't eaten dinner yet, have you? I fixed something simple."

"... Thanks."

Hoping to imbue my words with meaning, I silently repeated my thanks toward Wakasugi's back. I'd thought a life like this wasn't bad. I'd thought that way right up until a few hours ago. I had wanted to spend my modest life with someone I loved, once I resolved the issues with Naoko. But now ...

I noticed some bags of stuff piled in the corner of his room as soon as I stepped inside the living room. I stopped short and I assumed they must be the things Sakaguchi had left behind.

"Are those ...?"

"Yeah, it's his stuff. I couldn't trash them or anything. So I was thinking about sending them over to him. But I haven't found any good-sized boxes yet."

"... You are so kind."

I sounded cynical without meaning to. Wakasugi smiled wryly.

"I don't want to tell him to come get them. And I can't take them to the rehearsal hall, either."

"I understand."

He was so thoughtful. This must be why Sakaguchi had enough lingering affection to say that it had to be Wakasugi for him. But I couldn't say the same thing back. I couldn't firmly say that it had to be Wakasugi for me. I'd opened myself up and then allowed Sakaguchi to run over me.

"Why don't you take off your jacket? You can't relax in a suit. Do you wanna change? You are staying tonight, aren't you?"

Wakasugi led me to the bedroom, where a change of clothes was ready for me. I hesitated a little and then took off my suit jacket and tie.

"I was packing up things because I'm thinking about moving in the near future. I've been in this condo for a very long time," Wakasugi apologetically explained the situation. "Is that right?" I said. The exchange with Sakaguchi was pounding in my head and I couldn't concentrate on this conversation.

I didn't know what I was saying to Wakasugi. But I just felt an urgent need to say something. "Wakasugi, ... did you really break up with Sakaguchi-kun?" Caught off guard, Wakasugi looked puzzled.

"What do you mean ...?"

"He's an actor in your troupe. There's no way to cleanly cut him out of your life, then is there?"

"Private lives are a separate issue. We are civilized while working on our play but our romantic relationship is completely over. Drawing a clear line is another reason why I want to move out of here."

I should have been happy to hear this, to learn of the reasons for his move. In reality, however, I felt something bitter spreading through my mind.

"... Did anything happen?"

Wakasugi asked, touching my shoulder. I gently pushed his hand away.

"Oh, nothing. I'm just tired ... I guess. I'm acting weird today, huh?"

I sat down on the bed with my jacket still in my hand.

I didn't want to give him up. I didn't want to give up Wakasugi for anyone. But what about me? Was I ready for all of it? Was I willing to give up everything I had for Wakasugi? I knew I was getting a divorce from my wife sooner or later. But, I hadn't thought about hurrying up that process for Wakasugi. I wasn't prepared to face a world in which people knew about my relationship with Wakasugi. Wakasugi is different from me. He would go all in. We have that basic difference, I had to admit.

After all I was ...

"... Wakasugi, shouldn't you take some time and think before you actually move? You don't have to settle accounts on everything in such a hurry. I'm ... not ready. Even if you are drawing a clear line, I'm not prepared for it."

I'd lose a lot and be probably devastated if my relationship with Wakasugi was revealed. The divorce with Naoko was inevitable anyway. But if my secret became known, Naoko would be hurt more than was necessary. It would be unbearable at my work as well if Miyata or some-body else started spreading the story. Would I be able to handle it?

"My relationship with Naoki had been a mess for more than six months, Noda. Even if I hadn't met you again, we would still have broken up."

I listened with my head down and Wakasugi slowly sat down next to me.

After a while, Wakasugi continued. "Am I moving too fast ...?"

I didn't know how to respond. So I simply said, "I don't know." In fact, I was the one who was moving too fast and was wandering around alone with the fears within my head.

"I didn't think that my drawing a clear line with Naoki would make you say that you are not prepared. Don't worry. I won't demand that you get an official divorce from your wife or anything."

I knew Wakasugi wouldn't demand anything from me. He would never blame anything on anyone else no matter what happened. By comparison, I'm so... self-centered.

How I wish Wakasugi had criticized me for getting married! I felt tormented by a sense of guilt precisely because Wakasugi was so damned understanding.

I held my forehead and tilted up my face.

Wakasugi, aren't you afraid that I may use and abuse you then end up totally betraying your trust and sincerity? Don't you suspect deep down that I'm a bad person?"

"Bad person?"

Wakasugi asked me back, laughing. Maybe Wakasugi thought that I was already using and abusing him.

"You have always been preoccupied with 'good' and 'bad.' I don't care even if you are a bad person. I won't blame you, because I love you."

"... Please, reproach me ..."

Wakasugi is graceful and manly. I'm not like that. Seeing that decisive difference left me emotionally devastated.

"I'd feel better if you condemn and humiliate me. I don't want your kindness."

Wakasugi had recently said, "I only want to be gentle with you." I thought that I had accepted it. I thought I could live with that. How could I say such an awful thing to him now?

Wakasugi's facial expression changed. He looked baffled and confused. Wakasugi asked cautiously in a subdued voice.

"Noda, what's upsetting you?"

"I don't know."

I lowered my head again, covering my face with both hands. I was afraid of opening my mouth again. I feared I might say something that would damage our relationship beyond repair. But I also knew I couldn't abruptly end our conversation in the middle. I remained still for a little while, looking down at my feet through the fingers covering my face. Wakasugi remained silent, as if

waiting for me to calm down. But our silence brought no solution.

Eventually I heard Wakasugi sigh.

"... Let's not get into an argument. You're tired today, right? Why don't you take a bath? That will calm you down."

Wakasugi patted my shoulder as if to soothe me. I shook my head.

Wakasugi's tender and caring attitude made me feel even more miserable.

"Why are you so understanding? I've been saying rather awful things to you, haven't I?"

"Earlier, you said you were tired today. I don't want to get into an argument at such a time. There's no point in talking unless we're talking about our real thoughts and feelings."

"What if I'm telling you what I really feel?"

I looked at Wakasugi provokingly. There was a beat before Wakasugi replied.

"Do you really mean that?"

It seemed that Wakasugi was being careful not to provoke me in return. I knew what he was afraid of. I knew he wanted to prevent me from saying the decisive words.

"Would you ... break up with me?" I looked away slightly and said the words Wakasugi hadn't wanted to hear. "I ... I can't do this. I can't be in a real relationship with a man. I can't make that my regular life."

A moment of silence ensued. Then Wakasugi murmured, "I see." He seemed to have expected it. I didn't know if he took it seriously, or didn't want to think I was serious. Wakasugi gave me a hesitant look.

"I understand what you want to say. But let's not talk about this any more tonight."

The calmer he was, the more fervently I wanted to snap back at him. "When are we going to talk about this if not tonight? Are you going to spend the night with a man who just brought up the idea of breaking up? Are you okay with that? How are we going to sleep? You think I'll change my mind if you make love to me as usual? Or are you going to let me sleep in your bed while you sleep on the sofa? In your own place? You are an understanding person but isn't that going too far?"

Clearly, I had chosen precisely the words that would jangle his nerves.

My rational mind told me that it's best if we broke up now. But there was one part of me that was screaming that I didn't want to break up. That part of me wants Wakasugi to say, "I don't want to lose you."

"Noda, are you trying to make me mad?" Wakasugi asked in a low voice

and I was shaken. Although he had looked grim for a while, he regained his composure soon.

“I don’t wanna be a burden to you, Noda. If you want to break up ...”

“Oh, if I wanna break up, that’s okay with you? So breaking up or not breaking up, either way is fine by you then?”

I trapped him in his own words by reflex. Wakasugi fastened his gaze at me while keeping his lips firmly clamped shut. I watched uncontrollable emotions swelling up in his eyes. It felt like time had frozen. I’d begun to feel hazy when I felt myself being suddenly pushed back. Staggered by this, I found that I had fallen onto the bed and was looking up at Wakasugi.



"What ... do you want?" Wakasugi whispered in a strained voice, peering at me.

"I'm telling you that I'll let you break up with me without resisting because you are telling me that's what you want. Or do you actually want me to forcibly shove you down on the bed like this? Do you want to hear me say, 'I will never break up with you. I won't allow it.'? Is that what you want?"

Wakasugi didn't seem distraught. I saw only a cold fury in him, which was hard to look upon. I had succeeded in drawing out the reaction I wanted. I quailed and at the same time, I felt enraptured. I saw a dim light flickering in Wakasugi's gaze.

"You can't or won't be satisfied ... with a man who is always gentle?"

I'd brought this on myself. Seeing Wakasugi's calm and terrifying frustration, I felt a chill run down my spine. "Do you wanna break up or not? Tell me," Wakasugi asked again with his cold gaze fixed on me. I wanted to run away, but I couldn't take my eyes off of him. I was shaking but it wasn't out of fear. Wakasugi loved me so very much but all I could give him was a cause to be angry. I was shaking because my stupidity was so pathetic.

"I want to ... break up with you," I said on the spur of the moment. I knew it was a horrible thing to say but I quickly went on. "And yet I don't want to break up, either."

Wakasugi loosened his grip on my arms. I thought Wakasugi was smiling. At the next moment, though, I saw his face twisted in despair. Or rather, something more than despair.

Wakasugi abruptly grabbed at my chest and pulled upon my shirt so hard that the buttons on my shirt almost came flying loose as the material parted. He reached in to caress my bare skin.

"What ... are you ...?"

My protest was swallowed up by his kisses.

Wakasugi moved his face closer to my exposed chest. He pinched my nipples almost hard enough to snap them off. He then nibbled on my nipples with his lips.

"Stop ..."

"Why are you resisting? ... You want me to do this, right? This is what you wanted."

Seeing his cold stare, I gasped.

"I'll do what you want, Noda. As much as you want."

Wakasugi pulled off my pants and underwear. Then he picked up my tie and tied my right hand and right ankle together. I was forced to get into an

awkward posture with my legs spread apart and my lower body exposed.

"Sto ..."

I tried to resist but Wakasugi kissed my sensitive spots. He used his tongue but my shriveled dick didn't respond at first. He kept on licking and sucking until my cock became engorged. Overwhelmed by an extreme pleasure I couldn't resist, I twisted and moaned. I wanted to say, "This is not what I wanted," but I was rendered speechless.

Soon after that, Wakasugi slowly raised his upper body slightly, gulping at the same time. He looked me in the face triumphantly. His lips were wet with my overflowing juices. Still charged up after my orgasm, I looked at his lips. There was a somewhat intense silence and the scent of sweet lust surrounded Wakasugi. He looked defeated in spirit.

"I know everything about your body, Noda. Yet I can't understand you. I don't understand your mind. Can you imagine ... how hard that is for me? I sometimes feel so frustrated that I want to just rip you apart. That would be playing right into your hands though, huh?"

Wakasugi bent one of my legs back and lifted me up into a pose that allowed me to take him inside. He pressed his throbbing cock against my crease and kissed me. His tongue gently invaded my mouth and my already flushed body got even hotter.

"Noda ..."

Wakasugi spread my legs apart and bent my knees up. Then he rammed his engorged cock into me, hard. His stifled sigh cracked sweetly. Thrusting, Wakasugi licked my ears wildly and bit my earlobes. He reached down to my chest and rolled my nipples between his fingers. He flicked and pushed on my hardened nubs. The movements of his fingers were sweet and delicate.

"Noda, I like you." Being on top of me, his actions were somewhat forcible and wild but his voice was faint.

I was responding to his movements when the center of my mind became suddenly hazy. The parts of our bodies which were rubbing against each other were meltingly hot.

"Noda, ... I think I've been preoccupied by my own one-sided love all this time. What should I do?"

The tie binding my arm and leg had come loose. I put both of my legs and arms around his back to bring him into me deeper. His rhythmic motions shook my whole body. His desperation brought me into a pleasant trance.

"Noda ... Noda ..."

Wakasugi rammed in with more force. As I heard him calling my name, I

said, "Oh yes ..."

"Give me ... some more," I begged, my legs still wrapped around Wakasugi's back. He moved up a gear with his ramming motions. Wakasugi penetrated even deeper and came inside of me, spurting his hot lust. Wakasugi then collapsed as if his batteries had suddenly run out. He was breathing harshly as he whispered in my ear. "I'll give you more of that... as much as you want. Just stay with me. You have ... finally become mine, haven't you?"

I fell asleep for a short time. When I woke up, it was still only around midnight. Not even an hour had passed since our lovemaking. Wakasugi wasn't lying next to me. Absent-mindedly, I collected my clothes which were scattered about and put them back on. I took my suit jacket from the closet and got fully dressed. I saw myself in the mirror on the inside of the closet door. I thought that I looked like a ghost or a goblin.

I want to break up.

I don't want to break up.

Both were true feelings.

Without knowing what I was doing, I left the room. It still felt as though Wakasugi was inside me. The feel of his cock within me and his scent were both still clinging to me deeply. I needed to escape from all that. Without thinking too much, I was moving towards the front door when I heard the sounds from the bathroom of Wakasugi taking a shower. I stopped.

... I shouldn't just run away like this.

Having second thoughts, I moved back into the living room. Finding myself at a loss, I sat down on the sofa. Sakaguchi may not have been serious about his threats. But what if he was? I couldn't picture myself calmly facing the consequences Sakaguchi might bring. I couldn't see myself hurting Naoko unnecessarily more than I already had when we eventually did divorce. On the other hand, I could possibly face the fallout from breaking up with Wakasugi. But if I did, I would lose a precious and invaluable thing. Things are different from the way they were ten years ago. I know now what the most important thing to me is. On the other hand, I have a life that I've built in a world unknown to Wakasugi.

I held my head. I wanted to fall asleep. I wanted to forget about all my worries. I just wanted to indulge in the scents Wakasugi left in my body. Then I noticed a pile of papers on the table by the sofa. I looked up. They were printouts from the web page of a housing information site.

He must be looking for a room. I was looking through the paper until I suddenly realized. Amongst the pile, there were train maps showing the routes between the closest train station from the condos and the Yamanote line station where his rehearsal hall was located. But there were also subway route maps. Why did he need subway maps? The destination on those subway maps was the closest stop to the bank where I worked. The moment I realized that, I felt faint.

Why is he looking for a condo? So that it would be easier for me to come by? Or does he want to live together eventually? Is that why he is looking for a place that's convenient for my commute?

I was certain that my guess was right. A quivering welled up. I chuckled, clasping those printouts. I found something rather tragically funny in all this. Wakasugi had wanted to talk about living together tonight, and I'd told him out of the blue to "break up with me." What horrible timing! I kept laughing until my eyes filled with tears. Now I knew why Wakasugi had said, "Let's not talk about this any more tonight." Wakasugi had wanted me to calm down so that he could talk about our potential new place. Come to think of it, he'd spoken about moving at the start of our evening. I was too dense to catch onto his cues. Far from it, as I'd interrogated Wakasugi by asking, "Did you really break up with Sakaguchi-kun?" It occurred to me that I was completely hopeless at relationships. I was helpless even though I liked Wakasugi. I would keep hurting Wakasugi's feelings through insensitivity and cruel thoughtlessness. It would be an endless cycle. I stared into space with my damp eyes for awhile. Otherwise I would have burst into tears.

"Noda?" Wakasugi came out of the bathroom and called to me. I sprang up.

Looking at me dressed in my suit, Wakasugi clearly looked dejected. He might have noticed my eyes were red but didn't say anything about it. He must have noticed I had seen the printouts on the table. He must have guessed because I remained quiet.

"Are you leaving? ... This late?"

No strong emotions showed in Wakasugi's expression. Maybe he used up all his emotion during our lovemaking. He looked weak and fragile.

"I'll walk to the station and catch a taxi."

"I see."

He smiled slightly. A smile of resignation perhaps. He only had a bath towel around his waist. He roughly dried his wet hair with another towel as if to show there were nothing more to say. I knew this part of him from before.

Wakasugi'd left me with no apparent difficulty ten years ago. Wakasugi is

manly and gracious. I thought for sure then that Wakasugi had given up on me ten years ago. That's why I'd been so stunned to hear Wakasugi say that I had dumped him.

If I said, "Well, then," and left, Wakasugi would simply see me off without demanding any explanation. That would be the end of it.

I suddenly felt stifled.

"Wakasugi ..."

"What ...?"

Wakasugi poked his head out of the towel and looked at me unaffectedly.

"Um ... Sakaguchi-kun came and threatened me, saying he would reveal my affair with you to the bank. I don't think he'd actually do such a thing. He may only be getting emotional but I ..."

It was a belated and lame excuse. "You are putting the cart before the horse," Wakasugi dismissed flatly in a cold tone.

"Why didn't you tell me that right away? Before you told me that you wanted to break up? Why didn't you explain the situation and try to talk things over with me?"

"..."

"You said you wanted to break up because you were worried, right? You were afraid that I would question Sakaguchi, which might only fuel his anger towards you. You were afraid that things could get more troublesome for you, right? That it was probably wise not to bother him if you want to protect yourself."

Wakasugi was wrong. I hadn't mentioned Sakaguchi first because I had heard his powerful pleading affection for Wakasugi. I didn't mention Sakaguchi because I felt guilty about Sakaguchi's fall, which may indeed be my fault: I couldn't totally deny it.

In a love relationship, someone is always outside the circle. There's nothing we can do about that. But I can't simply enjoy winning. I've seen a lot of things in my life and I'm too old for that. It's not that I have become gentler. The older we get, the more timid we become. In order to become a really bad person, you have to be either really strong or really dumb and I was neither. What good does it do to tell Wakasugi all that now?

I remained silent and Wakasugi looked saddened. Then he smirked with a touch of self-derision.

"I thought about this back in the old days, too, but you are really a complicated man, Noda. You are too much for me to handle. It's just that ... I sometimes think I could handle you just fine. I got my hopes up thinking that

I'm the only one that you really desire. I like that sense of hope. No matter how slim the chances may be, I want to keep chasing them. It's almost a sickness, huh?"

I knew that Wakasugi wasn't telling me everything about his long-term affection for me. Seeing his eyes looking philosophical, I knew Wakasugi was parting his ways with me.

"I won't chase you any longer, Noda. I won't look for your image when I see other people. I may have sounded bitter earlier, but it is my fault that Naoki threatened you. I'll take care of it. Don't worry about it any more."

"I ..."

I started to speak when Wakasugi interjected sharply.

"Drop it. I thought I finally had you in my arms. I was elated while making love to you in bed earlier tonight. In fact, I was just thinking about going back to bed and holding you tight. We may be breaking up but at least you can stay with me until morning. But no. You couldn't even think about staying over. You are fully dressed in your suit instead. And then you tell me that you are leaving. You are cruel. That's the difference between you and me, Noda."

Wakasugi was right. I wasn't willing to give up everything else in my life and be content with just being with Wakasugi. Unless I could do that, I shouldn't be here. I should leave as soon as possible without saying too much more.

I could shed tears at the thought of this man planning to move in with me but I wasn't willing to sacrifice everything to actualize that plan. If that is so, then my tears were uncalled for. Unless I could answer his love and emotion, all I'd do was end up disappointing Wakasugi further.

I got up from the sofa. It felt as though I was escaping. Wakasugi said that he wouldn't chase me any longer. It was too late for me to make any other decision now. I wasn't going to say anything as I moved to the front door. Passing Wakasugi, however, I stopped.

"Wakasugi, ... would it have been better if you hadn't seen me again? Should we have just stopped when we broke up during our college days?"

"I don't think so. I was happy to see you again, Noda."

Wakasugi squinted. I wanted to say that I was glad, too. But the words wouldn't come out of my mouth. I started silently for the front door.

"Good-bye ... then," Wakasugi said his farewell to my back and his words gave me a pain in the chest. I couldn't help turning around. Wakasugi had the towel over his head as if to hide his expression. He wasn't seeing me to the door. Wakasugi turned on his heels and went back into the living room.

In the dead quiet room, the air was trembling. No, it was me that was trembling.

"Wakasugi!"

I couldn't help but yell.

"Remember that you told me that you'd never thought that I liked you? But I've always loved you. From the first moment I met you, it was love at first sight. I didn't know who you were, but I was head over heels in love with you. ... I've never felt that way with anyone else. You are the only one. Hearing me say this now, you may think, 'It's not like you, Noda.' But I want you to know that I have strong feelings, too!"

Why was I trying to tell him this now? It was simply something that I had to let out.

There was no reply. I felt the strength drain from my body as I stepped outside. When I heard the door shut, I knew it was all over. I had taken but a single step towards the elevator when I heard the door swing open fast. I turned around to see Wakasugi darting out, panting. He must have put some clothes on in a hurry. Our eyes met. They were like magnets. The souls that just parted, instantly became intertwined again.

"What do you want me to do?" Wakasugi grabbed my arm. I saw all of his bewilderment, frustration and the remnants of his affection, which he was having a hard time giving up, in his eyes. Wakasugi sharply demanded, "What do you want to do? What do you want me to do? Just tell me."

My eyes, like Wakasugi's, undoubtedly showed mixed emotions. But I saw one thing clearly at this moment.

"I don't wanna break up with you. I don't want to ..."

If we break up now, I won't be able to pretend that I'm not hurt, like I could ten years ago. In order not to lose this man again, I'd rather ...

"Wakasugi, I-" I choked up and Wakasugi hugged me, like he couldn't stop. There was a spot in my heart, where my feelings for Wakasugi lived. That was the only beautiful thing I had in my life. But I couldn't focus on that spot. I had to pay attention to other things as well, which obscured my vision sometimes. Moreover, my feelings were also ambiguous. I was too selfish to say that I was in love. The more clearly I saw the true nature of my feelings, the more I wanted to run away from Wakasugi. So why was I trying to pull him closer? Even if he gave me everything, I may not be able to give anything back.

There's a fever in my heart that I only feel when I'm with Wakasugi. Without this fever, I would live like a doll, devoid of even a body temperature.

"Noda, you said that you loved me? Could you say that again, here in my

arms?"

I closed my eyes, listening to Wakasugi's voice. Enveloped by his scent, I felt faint with a sense of falling from some great height. I keep falling but I'm not scared. I'm falling and sinking down to the bottom of earth while being tightly held in Wakasugi's arms for the first time.

"Wakasugi... I love you."

I kept repeating this phrase as if those were the only words I knew.

"I love you ..."

I couldn't break up cleanly. If we broke up, I wanted us to hurt each other until we fell apart into pieces. I didn't want to be understanding. My value system supported the timid and cowardly me. I wanted to cast away that value system, even if it meant denying my entire existence.

"You really are a difficult man. You are the most hateful guy in the world, sometimes," Wakasugi whispered in my ear, moving his face closer to my cheek. It felt like he was nibbling at my ear.

"Most hateful, yet also the most adorable. What do I do now? What do you want from me?"

I was totally drained and couldn't stand on my own any longer. I wrapped my arms around him and threw myself at him.

Let me fall all the way down, I thought. I don't care if I ever make it back up. I don't care if I stay in his arms forever.

"Or ... better yet. Kill me."

The moment I uttered these words, I thought I was going to collapse right there, falling through his arms. Wakasugi smiled and pulled me up by my arms hard.

"No, I want you to live. Live beside me."

Wakasugi pulled me closer and slowly kissed me.

I could die happily right now. I've always been bound by the ball and chain of convention. But that me is disappearing. I closed my eyes and listened to my heartbeat, thinking it a sound that I had never heard before. Perhaps Wakasugi's lips and his fever are giving me a new sense of life.

I won't waver any longer when I open my eyes.

Chapter III

I thought I smelt the rain even with my face buried in my pillow. Soon afterwards, I heard a window open and hurried footsteps coming from the living room.

He must be bringing our laundry in from the drying area, after noticing the leaden skies. Still half asleep, I stretched slowly under the light comforter as I pictured him hastily running around. But I didn't get up.

After a short while, I opened my eyes to see that the bedroom window was ajar. Waka-sugi must have left it that way for ventilation. I could hear the lyrical pitter-patter of the rain through that opening. The chilly, moist air washed away the concentrated scent of our love-making that had pervaded the bedroom.

Finally I sat up, feeling a little lonesome. As I was sitting on the bed changing into my clothes, the door opened and Wakasugi looked inside.

"Oh, you're up, Noda?"

I checked the clock. It was just past one in the afternoon, although, due to it being the rainy season, the sky looked much darker than that suggested. I had actually woken up once just past ten to find Wakasugi watching my sleeping face. I had fallen asleep again after fooling around with Wakasugi.

I stretched out on top of the bed. Wakasugi had bought a new king size bed when he moved. The bed was more than big enough for two adult males to lie down on.

"Did you get to the laundry in time? Is it all wet?" I asked about the laundry and Wakasugi frowned slowly.

"If you were aware of the problem, why didn't you get up and help me? I had to bring it all in in a hurry by myself."

"Because I was feeling drained. I wonder whose fault that is."

I still felt the lingering ache inside me. All because I accepted this man's lust upon my earlier awakening. The tone of my voice was like the purr of a cat, but Wakasugi's frown deepened. He approached the bed and sat down.

"You're feeling drained?"

"Yeah."

I leaned against him, resting my forehead on his shoulder. "And you are responsible," I whispered to him. Wakasugi pulled me closer by my shoulder,

as if cuddling with a big cat, and he sighed in resignation.

"Noda, you are so mean-spirited. I thought I knew that already but I obviously didn't know the extent of it."

"Only with you, Wakasugi."

"That's even worse."

He smiled and moved his face closer to me. Watching his eyes, I whispered to him.

"Really, only with you, Wakasugi."

Wakasugi's eyes turned emotional and misty. He whispered, "Promise me that it's only with me," and he covered my lips with his.

We collapsed together on the bed, hugging and kissing. Our lust, which had already risen and subsided one time today, arose once again in our breathing. I glanced at the clock and thought that the day would be over before we did anything else. It was really endless.

"Wakasugi, the window." I drew his attention to the fact that the window was ajar. "No one can see us," Wakasugi dismissed instantly. Nevertheless, he got up to close the window.

Wakasugi's new condo is on the seventh floor so there was no need to worry about a slightly opened window. The modern interior offered a very tranquil mood, with a color scheme of a chic dark brown as the base. The color scheme was consistent from the living room to the bedroom. The basic floor plan included a spacious living room and bedroom as well as a den which could be used as an office. I tried to stay away from the den, yet I knew where everything was and the layout very well, just like it was my own house. I even stored a few sets of clothes in his closet. That way, I could come over on weekdays as well if Wakasugi was home.

While Wakasugi was closing the window, I sat up. Wakasugi saw me fixing my shirt as he returned to bed. "No one can see us," Wakasugi repeated, looking a little disappointed.

"You never know. Someone may be watching us with a telescopic lens."

"Why would anybody wanna do that?"

"Because you're famous," I teased him and Wakasugi looked grim.

The theatrical troupe, which Wakasugi had started with some of his friends and then had assumed the presidency of, was well known in the media. Wakasugi rarely goes on a stage as an actor now. He mainly functions as a playwright and director, but this past spring, Wakasugi made a TV appearance as a passer-by for a midnight drama, whose script he had written. His appearance got attention from some industry people. They had offered

Wakasugi a more prominent role in another drama. Wakasugi hadn't been in the TV business up until then. Now, every time I teased him about his drama appearance, Wakasugi would sulk like a child.

Considering how handsome he is, Wakasugi must have had offers before. But Wakasugi has avoided TV exposure because he thought, "TV appearances are time consuming and tiring".

"Why don't you want to do it? The young actors in your troupe also landed some supporting roles in that midnight drama."

"They just wanna sell their faces so that more people will come to see our plays. That's okay. After their experience on TV, if the young actors think TV is for them, then that's fine with me. But if I become well known from TV, people may come to the theater with preconceived ideas about me because of the TV drama. That wouldn't be good. I'm not doing the same thing at my theater as I do on TV."

"How is it different?"

"They are totally different. TV footage is like a record. But the theatrical performances are different each time, even using the same script. In a precise sense, theater is an art that can't be preserved on record. And ..."

Wakasugi paused in a middle of talking about the theater as if he was regretting it. He then looked down.

"This kind of talk ... must be boring."

"No, why? I would love to hear more. I asked because I didn't understand the difference. After all, I don't know much about your world."

Back in our college days, Wakasugi and I shared a small space, three meters in radius, just the size it took to bonk around on a bed. Once we got outside that space, we didn't know what the other was doing. I guess I can't speak for Wakasugi, but that is what it was like for me. So, we'd had a relationship that was sort of confined to a closed chamber, with just the two of us inside. It wasn't until recently that I started to see Wakasugi's larger surroundings. It's like I had been in a room with all the windows closed. But now the windows were suddenly open and letting the bright light and scenery in, hitting my eyes. I get confused sometimes.

I realized that I really didn't know anything about Wakasugi. And at the same time, I couldn't help but become childishly curious and want to know everything about him. But when I ask sincere questions regarding his work, Wakasugi becomes shy and says that he's not used to talking about this with me.

"You are so curious, Noda. This is strange. I'm not used to it," Wakasugi

frowns with a cynical smile.

"You're not used to it? Why? Do you think I'm such a cold-hearted person?"

"You are extremely cold-hearted. You are evil and selfish. You say you want this and that, but when you have them you say, 'I don't want them after all.' You are indecisive. You care too much about your public image. You look composed and innocent but in fact you are quite dirty and lustful. And you are an uncontrollably enthusiastic masochist."

"How can you say that?"

I got mad and shot him a dirty look. Wakasugi obviously didn't care for me at all.

"You are the scum of the earth, Noda. But ... I like you," Wakasugi whispered, almost like a sigh, and put his lips onto mine. "You are the man I love." Wakasugi's words were way too sweet, which made me somewhat apprehensive. But I accepted his weight, nevertheless, as he crawled onto me again. Two thirty-something adults exchanging pillow talk endlessly. This must be a comical sight, I thought.

Ever since Wakasugi moved out of his old condo and moved into this new place, I've visited him almost every single weekend. It's been about three months since this "honeymoon" period started. We have been making love all the time, but it seems like it's never enough. More ... more. We have an insatiable appetite which can never be satisfied with what we give to each other. The love I had finally captured after ten years was so sweet that I was carried away by it, glutting myself upon it.

There were many things left unresolved. I am an ordinary salaryman working at a bank. I have a wife, even if we are separated. Without reaching some kind of conclusion to these problems, this sweet period won't last forever. I was aware of that. There's also something else other than my wife, Naoko. I am worried about Wakasugi's ex-lover, Sakaguchi.

Wakasugi told me, "Naoki is now devoting himself to acting. So don't worry." Wakasugi had also said that he had talked things over with Sakaguchi and everything was squared away. But I wasn't so sure because I remember how frenzied Sakaguchi had become when he came to see me that day.

I couldn't keep asking, "How's Sakaguchi-kun doing?" Wakasugi might think I didn't trust him. In fact, I didn't worry about Sakaguchi as much as I did about Naoko. But Sakaguchi was still a cause for concern in the back of my mind.

I will stay with Wakasugi. I won't waver no matter what may happen. I

thought I'd made up my mind about that.

"Wakasugi, you always get up before I do," I said, raising a subject that had been on my mind for some time. Wakasugi had his face against my chest and I was stroking his hair. "I haven't really seen your sleeping face. You always get up first and take a shower. Then you come back to bed and start fooling around just like this. I wish we could doze off together."

I implied 'instead of doing what you are doing now' when I grabbed the fingers that were trying to pull up my shirt. Wakasugi smirked and looked me in the face.

"When I'm sleeping with you, I can't relax. You know that, don't you? When we are sleeping together, I can't help but touch you. I am trying to control my unending urges."

"Who's dirty and lustful now?"

Wakasugi whispered, "We are evenly matched," into my ear and nuzzled my neck.

"I'm ... worried." His murmur sounded nonchalant yet insecure. "If I sleep too deeply, you may run away from me. So I can't sleep in peace. My sleep is always shallow. It's been that way for a long time ... It's not only because of you, Noda."

"Then why?"

"Don't know. I guess it's okay for me to leave but I can't stand it when someone leaves me. That's why I asked, 'Is it better if I'm not here?'" when our relationship was in trouble before. If it doesn't work out anyway, it is better to end it sooner than later. Less damage that way."

In the old days, I'd never liked to see him reveal his weakness. But it does not irritate me any more. The man who makes love to me, I want to know how he's lived and what other faces he has. I want to get a true picture of him.

"I'm not going anywhere any more," I swore in a whisper. "I've come a long way to reach you. I don't have anywhere else to go. I'm staying with you."

Wakasugi gazed at me in silence for a while as if to verify the truth of my statement. During this silence, I could sense his joy and doubt at the same time. Wakasugi must be worried because I've been putting off my divorce. But he doesn't blame me for that.

Wakasugi sat up gently. He looked me in the eye and said, "Glad to hear that," smiling.

The house I was sleeping alone in on weekdays didn't mean much to me any more. Wakasugi's condo where I spent my weekends was more like "home."

One day late at night, I was on my way back to my own house, or as I felt about it, back to my temporary accommodations, after going drinking with my co-workers. My house where nobody is waiting, as always. When I came to the front of the house, I became flustered at an unusual sight. There was a light in the window.

It could be Wakasugi because he has a key. But I was convinced otherwise as I stood in front of the entrance.

Who could it be?

I opened the door to find a pair of dainty ladies shoes neatly left by the threshold. Although I had expected something like this sooner or later, I instantly turned pale.

"Dear ...?"

Naoko slowly appeared from behind the living room door.

It had been six months since I last saw her. She had looked worn when she left the house, but now she looked calm and fresh, just like she used to when we were dating. She used to wear her long hair down her back, but now her hair was cut to shoulder length, which made her look younger. She wore casual looking clothes that I had never seen before. She looked nice.

"Welcome home. You're late. Have you been drinking? I fixed dinner but it is cold now."

"Um ..." I managed to respond but couldn't find an actual word to say. Finally I muttered, "I'll go change," and went upstairs. The moment I stepped into the bedroom, I felt myself break out into a cold sweat. I sat down on the bed and pondered what to do. It took me more than ten minutes to take off my suit jacket. Thinking about the confrontation that awaited me downstairs, I felt somber.

It was only natural for my wife to come home. I couldn't ask her, "Why are you here?" I also couldn't ask her, "Are you back?" or "Are you coming back to live with me again?" That was taken for granted because we were married.

I hadn't expected her to come back like this without warning. But, she did have the right to do this. Did she want to start over? Maybe she didn't explain the reasons for her actions because she wanted to wipe the slate clean? It was no use pondering by myself. I mentally prepared myself and went downstairs. I could hear some lively sounds coming from the TV set in the living room.

Naoko was sitting on the sofa. She noticed me and turned around saying, "Do

you want to eat something?"

"No thanks. I've already eaten."

"I see. I made pumpkin soup. You still like pumpkin soup, don't you? You can warm it up and have it tomorrow then." Naoko's words implied that she wouldn't be staying. That relieved me but I became more confused as well. If she wasn't coming back, why did she come at all?

Naoko kept looking at the TV screen without saying anything in answer to my unspoken question. At first I thought she was purposefully avoiding me, but then I realized that she was actually getting into the TV show.

"You're watching this drama, too? You recorded it. Isn't it unusual for you to watch a drama like this?"

I finally realized what Naoko was watching. She was watching the midnight drama Wakasugi had written the script for. It had aired as the pilot for a TV drama series.

"Ah ... yeah." I was afraid my voice would give something away, so the short reply was all I could muster.

"I guess your tastes have changed since you began to live alone. Were you so bored that you had to kill time by watching dramas? Whenever I used to talk about interesting dramas, you always looked so indifferent."

I feared that Naoko would have an emotional explosion any second because she sounded a little spiteful. But she only smiled softly. I had always thought she was a peaceful and calm woman. But when our marriage went sour, she began to get hysterical over things and would take it out on me. I was the root cause of all her pain.

"Hey, don't you think this young actor looks like you?"

Hearing her words, I looked to the TV. I almost cried out in surprise. Naoki Sakaguchi was on the screen. The guy Wakasugi used to date.

I knew each episode was self-contained in this drama. I also knew that some young actors from Wakasugi's troupe were making appearances in supporting roles. But I didn't know Sakaguchi was involved.

"He really looks like you. He looks nice, don't you think? He looks earnest and makes a favorable impression."

I watched the drama with Naoko for a while. Sakaguchi had a fairly big role, making appearances in many scenes.



I saw him acting for the first time. He seemed ordinary and agreeable, without projecting unnecessary color or personality. Other actors were trying to exhibit their unique "colors." In contrast to them, Sakaguchi actually stood out by his realism. I knew that Sakaguchi wouldn't be playing a role in a drama Wakasugi was involved in, if there were still something uncomfortable between them. So it must be true that Sakaguchi was "devoting himself to acting" after talking things over with Wakasugi. Maybe everything was squared away.

Eventually the drama ended. Naoko turned off the TV. I looked at her fingers as they held the remote control: Her nails had a dark salmon pink nail polish on and some glittering decorations had been added onto their surfaces. I had never seen Naoko with such elaborate nails.

"I'm so surprised that you are watching a drama like this one. If you'd watched it while we were together, we could have had something to talk about."

Naoko was talking in the past tense. That realization brought a chill to my heart. Naoko appeared to have broken out of her rut. Her tastes in clothing had changed. There could be no doubt that Naoko was a different person from the one I had last seen a half a year ago. There was also no doubt that Naoko had come back in order to discuss something with me.

"Naoko," I called her name, thinking that I needed to be prepared. She watched me silently. Her eyes looked empty, devoid of all emotion. I couldn't believe this was the same person who had always been so emotional. Since it was oddly quiet, I got a very bad feeling about things. But then, Naoko smiled softly and the disturbing atmosphere melted away.

"I've come to discuss something with you. I think we'd better decide where we are going from here."

After I took Naoko to the station, I hailed a taxi and hurried to Wakasugi's condo. We hadn't made any plans for tonight, but I had to see him. It was after midnight when I got to Wakasugi's condo, but Wakasugi wasn't home. For a moment, I wondered what to do because tomorrow was a work day. But I thought that I could simply go in to work in the morning from here, using one of the suits stored in Wakasugi's closet, so I used my key to get inside.

As soon as I stepped inside, I wanted to call out, "Wakasugi," even though I knew nobody was there. I wanted to shout out what was on my mind. But, there was no one.

I tried to restrain myself, but I couldn't just sit still. I paced back and forth

inside the condo. I looked out the window several times, hoping to see Wakasugi coming home. Every time I looked, there was no sign of him. I collapsed down onto the sofa. I turned the TV on and watched the same drama, which Wakasugi had also recorded. It was the episode that had aired tonight. While watching Sakaguchi act, I kept telling myself that it was true that Sakaguchi was devoting himself to acting. I also watched the episode where Wakasugi had made his appearance. The producers were being playful by letting the screenwriter have a role. Wakasugi only appeared in one scene and had only a few lines. It was a small role that didn't affect the plot.

But Wakasugi shone in that small role. No wonder it had caught somebody's attention and they'd offered him a bigger role. Normally, a flawless and picture-perfect handsome man would be boring, because they look like well made dolls. But Wakasugi had his emotional inner self working for him. His expressions showed complex shadings of emotion, which added a unique depth and nuance to his two dimensional image. On screen, his expressions looked somewhat stoic and very sexy. Wakasugi had a very different screen presence from Sakaguchi. The scene Wakasugi appeared in was only a few minutes long. I played the footage over and over again, while feeling an impulse to shout out to the world, "You are the man I love."

Remembering Wakasugi's sweet voice, I repeated the same words in my mind. *The man on-screen, that's the man I love. I can say it openly. The man*

...

I got tired of waiting and lay down upon the sofa where Wakasugi usually placed his head, when he lay down on the sofa. It had his scent. I was horizontal on the sofa, sort of tasting the scent of his usual cologne, and the next thing I knew I was asleep.

When I woke up, I could see the morning sunlight streaming in. I felt his hand stroking my head. When I looked up, Wakasugi was kneeling, looking in at my face. He abruptly removed the hand that had been caressing my hair. He looked as though he had been caught in some mischief.

"I came home earlier this morning to find you sleeping here. I was so surprised. What happened?" Wakasugi narrowed his eyes. He reached out again to touch the corner of my eye.

There was something important that I had to tell him. I had been waiting for his return, thinking how dear he was to me. Pieces of those emotions floated in my hazy consciousness. I caught the finger which had been caressing the corner of my eye. I looked up at Wakasugi.

"Did you just get home?"

"No, a couple of hours ago. We finished shooting the drama, so I went to a wrap party."

"Have you slept?"

"I knew you'd have to wake up soon, Noda. So I was just waiting."

"You should have woken me up."

"You looked so peaceful, sleeping. So I thought I'd let you sleep. Don't you have to go to work today?"

On that note, I sprang up. Wakasugi chuckled in amusement. The moment I got up from the sofa, I came back to reality. And at the same time, I clearly remembered what I had to tell Wakasugi.

"Wakasugi ..."

I turned around to find him sitting on the sofa in my place, massaging his shoulders and stretching his neck. He looked exhausted. If I had told him last night, I would have shouted with excitement. But I was calm now. The sky behind him was bright and clear. Today must be one of those rare fine days in the midst of the rainy season. The sunlight coming through the windows was so bright that it looked as if the particles of light were scattered here and there. Dazzled by the light, I lost the power of speech for a second and looked at Wakasugi, who said, "What?" after waiting for me to speak.

My lips quivered. I felt like bursting into either laughter or tears.

"Naoko came back last night and we talked."

Wakasugi's expression froze.

"And ...?"

I knew Wakasugi felt concerned about my marriage. Unlike me, who always pestered him about Sakaguchi, Wakasugi never mentioned Naoko. Not one word. He was worried that I would someday tell him that I was starting my married life afresh, but he'd never asked me to end it cleanly and finally. He never wanted to make a married woman unhappy. Wakasugi was that kind of man.

"She said ... she wanted a divorce. She thought it would be better for us to become free."

Wakasugi opened his eyes wide, and I continued. "She brought it up. After our separation, she realizes that she doesn't want to start all over with me. She has found somebody else to love. So ... she wants a divorce."

She'd told me that it had been her fault because she couldn't fulfill her duties as a housewife. She'd said that she didn't need any alimony because she didn't want any trouble and we hadn't had any children. She only wanted the money that she had saved by herself from before our marriage, which we'd used to pay

the down payment on the house. She had very specific conditions, which showed she was serious.

Naoko asked me, "You wouldn't ask me for a larger share of the divorce settlement even if I told you that I had someone else, would you?" "Of course not," I'd replied. Then she smiled and said, "I knew you'd say that."

Wakasugi remained quiet for a while. The whole thing must have caught him off-guard.

"She ... did."

His confused look must mean that he didn't know what to say. It was, in a way, what we had been waiting for. But it's not something we could be wild with joy over. Any marriage affects the lives of more than two persons. Likewise, a divorce involves many people, too.

As for me, I wanted to shout about it last night. After a night's reflection, however, I didn't know what kind of facial expression I should wear to tell Wakasugi about our divorce.

Naoko and I had already been falling apart before my reunion with Wakasugi. Yet I somehow felt, deep down, that I'd been betraying Naoko since we were still married. That was why I couldn't really bring up my issues with Naoko about our "future."

I felt like my feelings were blithesome, suddenly losing the weight that had held them down and were now floating freely. And it was obvious where those feelings were floating to.

"Your wife brought it up. Um, if that's what she wants ..." Wakasugi kept repeating this as if talking to himself. He was relieved that we didn't have to hurt Naoko. After a while, he looked at me vacantly as if he had just noticed something.

"Then you are ... free, Noda. You can love anybody you want."

I nodded saying, "That's right." Wakasugi watched my face in silence. It seemed that he wanted to say something to me but couldn't form the words.

Wakasugi smiled slightly. It looked more like relief than an actual smile. He must have also felt that the weight, deep down in his heart, was finally gone.

It wasn't fitting for us to be joyful without reservations. We looked at each other. We understood what was going on each other's minds.

"Noda, the time." Wakasugi pointed at the clock, alarmed. I came back to myself.

"Oh, yeah. I need to change."

I hurried to the bedroom and the closet where my suits were.

As I moved, it felt like I was walking on clouds. We didn't have time now,

but we could talk about the details tonight. I no longer needed to go back to my house, where nobody waits for me. If it's okay with Wakasugi, I will just come here, even on weekdays.

I was changing my shirt and combing my hair when Wakasugi appeared at the door which I had left open.

"How about breakfast?"

I didn't have time to eat. I shook my head, thinking it was a rather weird question because he already knew my answer.

"No, thanks. Don't feel like eating."

"Yeah, naturally ..."

Wakasugi still lingered at the door. As I put my suit jacket on, I asked him, "What is it?"

Wakasugi then said quietly.

"You have to go, huh?"

Wakasugi was the one who had alerted me by saying, "The time?" I was at a loss, seeing his eyes that seemed to clutch at me.

Wakasugi still appeared a little lost, like his strength was drained. He was smiling but looked like he was about to fall over. He hadn't fully digested what he'd heard yet. It looked like he was trying to control his overflowing emotions. As we looked at each other, I felt some-thing bursting inside of me, too. Earlier, I'd thought I that could control myself, but, facing him like this, I was unable hold back any longer.

I ran to Wakasugi like I was drawn by an invisible force. As if he had been waiting for just that to happen, Wakasugi opened his arms to catch me. Held tightly in his strong arms, with my body almost off the floor, I kissed him eagerly. His lips were hot as they responded. Our tongues tangled and we suckled at each other's mouths. We exchanged something more than words. We finally moved apart, taking a breath of relief.

Wakasugi leaned against me and moved his lips closer to my ear and asked, "Do you have to go?"

"I'm not going. I'm not going anywhere," I whispered back deliriously. It was as if I had instantly been swept into the world of dreams.

Wakasugi was breathing hard. My ass was moving to meet his pelvic thrusts. My consciousness melted into a vague white cloudiness. Wakasugi moaned and made soft groans, sounding as if he were doing hard labor, as he finally shot the evidence of his pleasure into me.

He came many times. Every time Wakasugi rammed his cock into me, the movement made wetly indecent sounds. Wakasugi thrust back and forth to the wet sounds, each time with a slightly different angle as if he was trying to play different tunes on my pleasure center. He kept on ramming over and over again, sometimes shallowly and other times deeper. After reaching climax for what seemed the umpteenth time, I exhaled deeply and stretched languidly.

I looked at the clock and thought vaguely that normally, I would be visiting clients at this time.

Wakasugi moved away from me only to crawl back all over me again, caressing my body which was still swimming in the afterglow of our lovemaking. He sucked my nipples as if he was tasting some dessert. "Ahh," I felt ticklish and frowned. I moved my fingers to push his head away.

"Stop ... this has no bounds."

"Nothing wrong with that."

Wakasugi wouldn't listen to me and kept trailing his tongue over my chest.

"You are mine, right? Now you are all mine."

It sounded like pillow talk, but I thought his pathos was revealed in the single-minded way he murmured. I felt a chill run down my spine, feeling as though an invisible chain was tying me up. I wanted to be chained. But I also wanted to escape. In any event, I am not going anywhere. I have decided to stay with him.

We kept making love until this energetic man was fully satisfied. Then I fell into a short sleep. When I woke up, Wakasugi noticed right away as usual and looked into my face closely.

Apparently, he had taken a shower and stayed awake the whole time.

"Aren't you sleepy? You're so tough."

"I'm too excited to sleep," Wakasugi whispered, pinching my lips.

"Knowing that you are mine, I'm so happy. It's only natural that I don't know what to do with myself."

"Do whatever you like."

"There you go again. You're so mean. You didn't let me do what I wanted to do earlier, you resisted me."

"It's because you are way too horny." I felt the heat rising on my cheeks. I buried my face into the pillow. No matter how much I like him, it's not like my body wants him all the time. Unlike when I was young, my sexual desires have calmed down quite a bit. It's hard to keep up with Wakasugi's energy level.

I normally reach orgasm first but I keep getting poked furiously by Wakasugi's unflagging cock. My physical strength was gone. Each time he

pours out his lust inside me, it feels as if I'm being seized by a sweet and gooey disease.

"You're right. I almost feel scared myself. Why do I like you so much? I love you so much that ... sometimes I get the shivers."

I saw something self-deprecating and dark in his eyes and felt my blood freeze. Fixation stems from hunger.

When I'd had sex with Wakasugi during our college years, there was this one time that I'd felt as though my soul was being sucked out during a kiss. It was near the year's end. Wakasugi had been alone when I returned. He'd whispered, "I'm so glad that you came back early." Our relationship was seemingly cut off at that time, but time between Wakasugi and me seems to have been flowing continuously. Even after a blank period of ten years, nothing has changed. Once we embrace each other ... it somehow feels the same. It's a little bit scary, but even more precious at the same time.

"I guess it may be because I got dumped one time," Wakasugi teasingly kissed me lightly. He then shot me a serious look. "Don't dump me again, ever."

"Of course, I won't."

I'd never thought that I had been the one to dump him the last time.

Wakasugi smiled radiantly and nuzzled my neck.

"You are mine, Noda. You belong only to me."

Hearing him whisper that repeatedly, I nodded like I was hypnotized.

"So you're finally getting divorced."

After he said this, Horikoshi grunted for a while, searching for his next words.

Horikoshi had asked me to go out drinking with him for the first time in a long while. I had just told this old friend about the dissolution of my marriage.

There was a hum of activity going on around us inside the izakaya, but there was a complete silence between me and Horikoshi.

"I thought you might by some chance get back together. But it didn't work out, huh? Too bad." Horikoshi nodded feelingly. "Well, you've already decided. An outsider can't say any-thing to change that. And what are you gonna do with the house?"

"Although I'll have some of the loan left to pay off even after we sell, I'm planning to liquidate. I can't go on living in that house by myself."

"That'll be such a hassle. Your house is in a fairly good location, though.

Right, Noda? You bought it at a rock-bottom price, too. However, I guess the house may have depreciated in value by a lot. Hope it'll sell well."

I knew it was going to be a hassle. But I didn't think it was too much trouble, because I could now start living my new life openly. What I had to carry on my shoulders was what I had brought onto myself, so it didn't bother me all that much. I had been afraid to talk with Naoko all this time because other people's feelings were not something that I could handle by myself.

"Um, let's hope that it is a change for the better. For you, and for your wife. It's no use forcing yourselves. Think positive and keep your chin up."

Horikoshi laughed, trying to break the gloomy mood. He poured more beer into my glass.

"Then you're going to move once you sell the house, huh? Oh, yeah. Come to think of it. Wakasugi moved a few months ago, too. Looks like he broke up with his partner right after he sponged off of you."

"Um, yeah, I'd heard."

Whenever Horikoshi mentions Wakasugi, I get an uneasy feeling with a sense of guilt. It's always been that way, ever since our college days. I've had to hide my relationship with Wakasugi my whole life up until now. But from now on ...

"Horikoshi, after I sell the house, I'm moving in with Wakasugi."

Horikoshi opened his eyes a little wider, but just looked at me quietly as if to encourage me to go on.

"I'm actually sleeping at his new place most of the time already. After we met again, I've been seeing him all this time. Wakasugi and I are ... from back in college ..."

I'd decided not to hide any more but it was still difficult to talk straightforwardly. So I fell silent.

"That's alright. I sort of understand."

To my surprise, Horikoshi smiled at me wryly. "Wakasugi and I go way back. I know his preferences. Back in college, when he wanted to get to know you, I knew it wasn't just for friendship. But I never thought I would hear this from you, Noda." Horikoshi laughed and said, "Hearing you tell me this is a much bigger surprise."

Horikoshi must have been vaguely aware of our relationship all along. He had just pretended that he didn't know. I felt my shoulders slump and looked at my long time friend resentfully. Horikoshi took the hint and gave me an apologetic look.

"I didn't think it was gonna work out between you two."

His murmured words pierced my heart.

"I really didn't think Wakasugi and you were a good match, Noda. I think I told you once that you have very different value systems. It's not that one is better than the other or anything but ... I understand where both of you are coming from. So, I didn't think that things would work out. I knew Wakasugi never got over you fully. But I never expected you would fall for him, Noda. I suppose I guessed wrong. I'm not that a good judge of character."

After smirking mischievously, Horikoshi fastened his gaze on me, turning serious. "Did you know? Whenever he broke up with someone, Wakasugi would always crash at my place saying, 'I don't wanna be alone.' So I always knew whom Wakasugi was dating during our college days. But, he never told me anything about you, Noda. I don't know when it started or when it ended. He never said a single word about your relationship. It's kind of strange, considering how open he was about his other love affairs."

Horikoshi lowered his head and sighed.

"So I decided not to say anything. Talking about things sometimes makes it feel even worse. Words can make the heart bleed. I understand that much. You know, like you just can't tell anybody what's going on. You feel like your blood will gush out just by remembering those feelings. Noda, your relationship must have been like that for Wakasugi."

Hearts bleeding...

When I had my last sexual encounter with Wakasugi back in the old days, I had felt my heart bleeding for the first time. "I feel the same way. For me, Wakasugi is ..."

Horikoshi nodded and said, "I know."

"Like I said, Noda. I never thought in a million years that you would confess your relationship with Wakasugi. You two must be connected by a special bond. It's very interesting. When you know someone for a long time, interesting things happen unexpectedly."

I frowned at the teasing way Horikoshi spoke.

"Hey, don't make fun of me. I'm serious."

"That's the fun of it. It rarely happens that something which seemed impossible actually turns out otherwise. At my age, things usually only happen as you expect. So you are giving me hope."

"Don't mock me."

I glared at him but Horikoshi kept on laughing in amusement.

"Noda, you have changed. The fact you came forward to tell me about you and Wakasugi is one of the changes ... I think you've really changed. Let's

hope that it is a change for the better. You know, for everybody.”

Horikoshi raised his glass as if to make a toast.

Horikoshi kept saying “change for the better.” Was it because he saw the opposite? I sensed a deliberate tone of encouragement in his words. While I cheerfully responded to his toast by raising my glass, I listened carefully to the murmurs at the bottom of my heart.

Wakasugi became very busy with rehearsals for his new play in July. Our daily schedules became mismatched. I was living almost full-time in Wakasugi’s condo, so I didn’t feel any distance forming between us even when we didn’t see each other every day.

Wakasugi’s troupe had started when small theaters were in boom times. The troupe has continuously drawn good attendance, and is now considered to be one of the best veteran troupes around. I’ve watched some DVDs of their performances and found that unique dialogue was the key to Wakasugi’s scripts. He assembles words tactfully, which leads the plot to a surprise ending. It’s not so much about making an intellectual statement. It’s more of a carefully calculated stylistic beauty. It’s much different from the story-oriented script that he wrote for the midnight TV drama. What he writes for the stage is not the same at all. Although I’m out of touch with the entertainment industry, I’ve come to understand why Wakasugi would say that TV and theater were “totally different.”

Wakasugi often slept at the rehearsal hall. When he occasionally came home to find me there, he looked really happy. I simply loved seeing his happy face.

I was going to work from Wakasugi’s place and rarely went back to the house. I had already told my parents about the divorce. They were noticeably disappointed but I was too preoccupied with my own life to worry too much about them.

Naoko said that she would prepare the papers for our divorce. All I could do now was wait. The last thing that I had heard was that Naoko had started working in a café, run by her friend, that was located near her parents’ house. She was busy. She’d never called me since then.

In mid July, Wakasugi and I decided to eat out for dinner for the first time in a long while. We went to our favorite place in the neighborhood. While walking home from the restaurant, Wakasugi told me, “Lately, I feel like somebody’s shadowing me. I’m guessing it’s the news media.”

“Media people? Are they after you, Wakasugi?”

I wondered if we were being followed right then. I looked around and Wakasugi burst into laughter amusingly.

"Not really. I don't think I'm the target. Like I've said many times before, I don't get much media exposure. But when the young actors make their TV appearances, some get quite popular, almost like idols. In those cases, they normally quit the troupe and become the talents. And when the troupe has rising young stars, media people sometimes follow them after the troupe's drinking session. We have an actor now, who became famous from that midnight drama. So that's probably the reason for my suspicions."

That might be Wakasugi's conclusion but I had a different suspicion. Sakaguchi had told me that his friend worked at a private detective agency. If he was still on our case ...?

"Speaking of the midnight drama, Sakaguchi-kun was also in it, huh? I was surprised to see what a good actor he was. He fit right in, more than any of the other young actors."

"Yeah, he may fare better on screen rather than on stage. It's not so much that he's got character. But he is non-offensive and generic, which is hard to come by in pool of TV drama actors. A new director saw the drama and offered him a movie role. The director often makes films depicting regular life. I can understand why he thought Sakaguchi would be 'perfect' for it."

"My wife, Naoko, complimented him. She said he looked like me. I thought Sakaguchi-kun on screen was a very different person. He looked really good."

Wakasugi chuckled, he might have thought I was sulking or something.

"Your wife has good judgement, Noda. You look really good, too, although I know you don't like your face that much. I guess you want to look more masculine and dependable, which is not what you are."

After a while, Wakasugi looked down and murmured, "It was good that Naoki and I broke up. It was a good turning point for him. Since he has a great opportunity coming his way, like this movie offer, I want him to seize it."

"Do you want him to succeed in other venues? If that works out, he may quit your troupe, right?"

"That can't be helped. It doesn't bother me if he leaves our troupe. If he succeeds somewhere else, I'd be more than happy. It's great to see the people who've touched my life succeed, no matter what form that success takes."

I had ambiguous feelings listening to Wakasugi's words. My ambivalent feelings weren't from jealousy. They were because Wakasugi didn't want those whom he had been involved with to be unhappy.

It's only natural. I knew I couldn't live with Naoko but I never wanted her

to be unhappy. Not only Naoko, but even somebody whom I had broken up with in a fit of temporary hatred. I only wished that they would live healthy lives.

But does everyone think the same way? If the situation were different, I may not think that way, either. What if I can't help but hurt someone ...

"Are you jealous about Naoki?" Wakasugi asked teasingly. He was probably worried because I was being quiet.

"No, it's not that. It's just that he looked quite down when he came to see me. If this is a big chance for him as an actor, I want him to go for it. There's something else ... I'm worried that you are being shadowed by someone."

If Sakaguchi was devoted to acting, he wouldn't have a private detective sniffing. Then again, work is separate from love. Even if his work is going well with a movie offer, he might still be holding a complex grudge against me. The higher he moves up the ladder in his career, the more he might wonder, "How did I lose Wakasugi-san to a guy like Noda? I'm so much better." Maybe he he was thinking that way?

Well, that may explain the reason for someone following me around. But what do they want with Wakasugi? Are they thinking about sending an anonymous report about my homosexual relationship to my workplace?

"You're worried? Why?" Wakasugi asked but I couldn't tell him my paranoid suspicions. It wouldn't be fair to Sakaguchi. I must be overreacting.

"Well ... um ... you're famous. To hear that someone's shadowing you ... I thought that it wouldn't be good if they found out about our relationship."

"I've told you already. If they were to follow somebody, it would be one of the young actors from our troupe."

"Even so ... it wouldn't be good if our relationship came ..."

"What do you mean? That I'm going out with you, Noda?" Wakasugi laughed amus-ingly. Then he suddenly held my shoulder and quickly kissed me. It was around midnight but it was a bold move on a public street. I froze beyond mere surprise.

"What are you doing?"



"Don't worry. They won't be able to write anything even if the reporters saw us."

"You never know. That drama made you famous."

I turned pale, imagining flashy headlines on magazine advertising posters hung up in a train. Wakasugi narrowed his eyes merrily.

"I don't have the ambition to become a popular playwright who's prominent in the media anyway. I wrote the script for that drama because I was asked by college senpai who happened to be the director. When I said that 'they won't be able to write,' what I meant was that mass media won't write about homosexual lovers, period. Whether I'm famous or not has nothing to do with it. The subject matter is inappropriate for living room conversation, don't you think?"

"It's ... inappropriate?"

I was seriously worried about a scandal, so it felt anticlimactic. Nonchalantly Wakasugi went on explaining.

"In this industry, there are lots of gay people. Just being homosexual is not enough for a good story. That alone is not a scandal unless there's some kind of crime involved. If an actor goes to dinner with an actress, they say, 'Courtship Disclosed.' But if two actors spend the night at a hotel, the story passes right through the editing desk."

"Really? I'm ... ignorant about these things."

"You are an earnest office goer. You don't need to know. I would never get you involved in a mess. So, don't worry."

It was nice of Wakasugi to be concerned. But I wasn't worried about my workplace.

"I ... I was afraid that I might be a burden to you, Wakasugi," I murmured, sulking. Wakasugi smiled lightly.

"You won't be. Besides, I can wish Naoki succeeds in movies precisely because you are with me, Noda. I have room to breathe now in so many ways. I don't have to be greedy any longer. I've got the man that I'd wanted for so very long," Wakasugi declared unabashed, which bemused rather than gladdened me.

When we returned to the condo, I brought up a question: A question that was always sitting there at the bottom of my consciousness, one I haven't really been aware of it.

"Why do you love me so much?"

Wakasugi was moving to turn on the light in the living room but stopped short. Perplexed, Wakasugi turned around and said, "What?"

"Don't you think it's strange? Why do you love me so much? I don't share your sensitivity. And I'm stubborn and illogical."

"When we don't know the reason why we love someone, that's the person we love the most," Wakasugi immediately replied.

I stood there speechless, facing a guy who was smiling at me in an amused fashion, in a dark room with bright moonlight shining through the window.

Wakasugi dropped down to the sofa and said, "Well?" while looking up at me defiantly. "Now do you understand? You are mean and selfish to me. I told you that before, right? I know we don't have any common hobbies. You show interest in my theatrical work but your attitude is more like, 'I'm willing to learn,' rather than understanding intuitively. We have different preferences in terms of sex play. I knew that very well from a long time ago. You easily cut off what's important to me saying, 'it's merely a trifle.' Your face is my type alright. But if that's the only reason, Naoki, who's the same type, would do. But it has to be you. I love you."

Wakasugi extended his arms, beckoning me. I approached him as if hypnotized and stood right in front of him.

"Noda, you're the same way, aren't you? I'm not really your type. You like a man who is more mainstream, respectable like yourself, and has a position in society, right? The kind of a guy that you want to be. But you love me even if I'm not your ideal partner, don't you? That is the same thing."

Wakasugi grabbed my arm and pulled me closer. I easily fell onto his chest, listening to my heartbeat racing. It was like a clock ticking too fast inside my body. It was beating so hard that it was almost painful.

I looked down and said quietly, "Maybe I was only attracted to your appearance. You know, your beautiful face and body."

"Then if there is a man who looked exactly like me but his insides were different...Let's say you met him as a student and he would play kinky games and satisfy all your lusts and desires. An ideal mate who was a perfect match sexually. The two of you fucked like there was no tomorrow, spent a few months together in an apartment, and then broke up. If that's how it happened, would you still long for him after ten years? Like you longed for me, Noda? Upon a reunion, would you also tell him that you had 'loved him since back then'? Would you?"

I opened my eyes wide and looked up. I just couldn't take my eyes off of Wakasugi. His words left my heart naked. It was almost as if my bare heart was aching just from being exposed to the air. It felt like my heart was bleeding.

Trembling with the same pain I experienced as a student, I slowly shook my

head.

"I wouldn't."

"You wouldn't, would you? But you did because it was me, right?"

"Only you, Wakasugi. I love ... only you."

My voice was cracking. Wakasugi patted my head and whispered into my ear, "Noda, I love only you, too."

I couldn't say anything further. I hugged him and Wakasugi stroked my back in silence for a while.

"Suppose," Wakasugi whispered, as if afraid of being heard. "That there is a void without form or substance. Nothing recognizable exists there. Not your face, not your body. Nor my face, nor my body, which you call beautiful. Not the masochistic lust that you so enjoy. Nothing. Imagine unencumbered souls wandering around in that place. Face, shape, or body appearances mean nothing there. Different ways of thinking don't matter, either. There's only the power of attraction. Even in the void, I could still find you, Noda. Deep in my heart, I would hear a voice calling to me, 'This is him.' If my soul mate exists in this world, it has to be you, Noda."

Wakasugi is used to public speaking. His voice resonated as he transformed this quiet room into that totally different world. I pictured, in my mind, the void Wakasugi spoke of spreading ever outwards. In that vast expanse, there are two vague lights floating. Before becoming aware that I was "attracted" to those lights, I thought they looked like Wakasugi and me having sex in my old college apartment. Clear fragments of emotions that can not be named.

I thought there was only a physical and sexual relationship between Wakasugi and me. Yet the fragments came falling down every time we made love. Sometimes they merely twinkled slightly. Sometimes the fragments softened and gently enveloped us. And sometimes they transformed into sharp shapes that pierced. If souls have any shape, that is what they might look like. Clear and colorless—on the verge of becoming cloudy. They are protean, floating and changing shape constantly.

With my eyes closed, I stared at those subtle lights from my memory floating up.

"If there's nothing there, how do they become attracted to each other?"

Wakasugi pressed his lips against my ear.

"Souls are attracted to each other precisely because of the void. You'd feel lonely unless you have something."

You are needy. I almost said aloud that which I had wanted to say so many times when we were together in the old days.

I didn't feel lonely that often. I knew loneliness. But I took it for granted and didn't care to whine about it. People are lonely. People betray others. People are creatures that can do cruel and awful things to others without hesitation. That is all natural. I don't feel the necessity to complain about the human condition. Yet, I always felt a pain in my chest whenever I saw Wakasugi feeling lonely. His loneliness was much more moving than my own pain.

I don't feel many emotional ups and downs by nature. If anything, I'm a cold person. I care about good and bad because that's the values I know. The reason I like to be condemned, trapped and physically hurt may be because I am spiritually frigid by nature. But, I could feel Wakasugi's pain as my own. If I stay with him, I will be hot and greedy for him and, above all, for myself.

"Noda, you have changed." I remembered Horikoshi's voice. He had carefully repeated, "Let's hope that it is a change for the better." What was the anxiety I felt vaguely at that time?

"Noda ...?"

As he called, I came back to myself. Wakasugi was gazing at my face with a concerned expression and I smiled at him.

"Wakasugi, you are a romantic, aren't you? Since you have such a great voice, I got lost in your speech. Totally lost. It was too philosophical for me but ... hey, that stuff is right up your alley. I was almost beguiled."

"Who's beguiling whom?"

Wakasugi stared at me annoyed but not without satisfaction. He kissed me with a snapping motion. Then he turned me around, held me from behind, nuzzled his face in my hair, and became still. Just like he used to after sex when we were younger.

If there's no form or substance in the void, how does the yearning for others arise? I could never come up with these theories on my own. Wakasugi is the reflective one. In reality, it's nearly impossible for nothingness to exist. It's generally agreed that matter "exists." And various elements are bonded together in ever increasing complexity. Nothing is 100% pure. We can get close to purity with material things by refining, but human minds and souls are different.

This man who claims he could find me even in the void, a world I can't see without him...

Is it possible for our minds and souls to meld with total purity in the void without form or substance? If that place exists, I want him to lead me there.

On the opening day for his new play, I went to see live theater for the first

time. The advance tickets were sold out and there was a line of people trying to purchase the remaining day-of-the-performance tickets available. The theater was full.

I found something curious in the flyers placed on the seat. Among the notices for upcoming theatrical events, there was an ad featuring a group of young actors from Wakasugi's troupe. The group was going to be performing in a smaller theater. I had heard that actors doing side projects wasn't uncommon but what drew my attention was the cast. There was a picture of Sakaguchi with a caption saying, 'This will be my last stage performance.'

He's really leaving the theater to work in the TV and movie business. Just as I was thinking about Sakaguchi, the curtain went up. Sakaguchi was on stage, too. As Wakasugi told me, the screen may be better suited for highlighting his individuality. His strength, which is buried on stage, shows up thoroughly on camera.

The dialogue among the people on stage revolved around one keyword. The dialogue was speedy and up-tempo. The lines didn't have any unnecessary elements, which led the audience to reach a single conclusion. There was no room for sentimentality in his play. I remembered Wakasugi's big speech about the void and souls, which amused me. I thought to myself, 'And the writer of this play was talking about souls?'

Wakasugi can choose all these concise words and put them together logically in a script. Yet he spoke so grandly and vaguely about love. Does this mean that how Wakasugi wants to present himself is different from how he truly is? But I know. Wakasugi burns with a fever and is an extremely needy guy. The stage is one place for self-expression. But I know a side of him that is not exposed in public.

Judging by the steam the curtain call gathered, it was obvious that the performance was a success. Then I realized that it was none of my concern how Wakasugi's play was reviewed. It doesn't matter how handsome he is or how talented. It doesn't matter if he's cheered or becomes obscure and taken no more notice of. None of that matters to me.

I just love the fever Wakasugi presses into me when we are alone. I love the pliantness of his arms that hold me tight and never let me go. Hearing the endless applause of the audience, I felt hot sensations welling up in my mind. *That's the man I love. I ...*

After the show, I went backstage. Wakasugi was continually surrounded by people, and I couldn't get a chance to talk to him. I found myself at a loss when someone called, "Noda-san." I turned around to find Sakaguchi standing there

with a smile.

"It's been a long time. You came to see our performance?"

This was the first time I had seen Sakaguchi since the day he came to visit me, demanding that I give Wakasugi back. I was too surprised to talk. Sakaguchi looked little embarrassed.

"I'm sorry. I never apologized for my rude behavior. After that day, Wakasugi-san told me, 'Don't go anywhere near Noda again.' I'm terribly sorry."

Sakaguchi lowered his head in apology, which looked sincere. It was hard to believe that this was the same man who had threatened me using a private detective agency. I almost suspected that this was all an act.

"You are ... no longer ...?" I asked him indirectly. For I couldn't possibly ask him a straightforward question like, "So you are not going to threaten me any more?" Sakaguchi bit his lips, looked straight at me, and then lowered his head again.

"I wasn't really myself back then. I couldn't see my circumstances clearly. Using my private detective friend and ... I was focussing only on Wakasugi-san. Or rather, I tried to ignore everything else. I tried not to see my situation and my other problems. I didn't want to know what the underlying cause of all my troubles was. Instead of searching for an answer, I made myself believe it was all your fault. Wakasugi-san told me later on, 'Don't get Noda involved. If you have to do something, do it to me. Hate me as much as you like.' Then I came to my senses."

I didn't want to believe Sakaguchi was lying. He had been very straightforward when he begged me to return Wakasugi to him. It's probably in his nature to express his feelings earnestly.

"I saw the TV drama you were in. I also heard you have a movie offer."

"Yes. After this performance and the one by the group of young actors, I'm leaving this troupe. I plan to sign a contract with the agency that expressed the interest in me and go into the movie business."

"Great."

I got into a relationship with Wakasugi while I was still married. I felt a little guilty about Sakaguchi, so it was great to hear that his work was going well. If Sakaguchi begins to move forward, putting his relationship with Wakasugi away in the past, well, I couldn't ask for anything more. It was still surprising to see such a drastic change, though. Sakaguchi had been so rough and depressed when he threatened me, but he'd become a sparkling new person after his breakup with Wakasugi. Judging from his expression, I could clearly tell that he

didn't have any bad feelings towards me, either. It wasn't that I doubted, but it was really amazing to see how quickly Sakaguchi had gotten over it.

"This time, I want Wakasugi-san to chase me as an actor. I want to succeed in movies so that Wakasugi-san will come to me and say, 'It's time for you to come back to the stage. I need you.' That's my goal."

Hearing these words, I became convinced that Sakaguchi was telling me his honest feelings. He really hadn't been himself when he had threatened me. Wakasugi said that Sakaguchi had been using him as a refuge. Wakasugi had known it from the beginning.

I'm sure Sakaguchi really liked Wakasugi from the bottom of his heart. But Sakaguchi is still rather young. He can use this bitter experience as a springboard and move forward without looking back now that he sees a big future ahead of him. It's only natural.

"I don't know much about theater. But ... I'm rooting for you. I thought you were the best actor among the young actors. Honestly, I'm just an amateur, but you seemed to be the best to me." A compliment coming from me probably didn't mean much to him, but he smiled and said, "Thank you very much." He hesitated a little and then he spoke tentatively.

"Um ... I caused trouble for you, Noda-san. I'm not in any position to say this but ... I hope you and Wakasugi-san stay together."

At these unexpected words, I blinked. Sakaguchi smiled wryly. "He really loves you, Noda-san. When Wakasugi-san said, 'Don't get Noda involved,' {I thought he'd get mad and yell at me angrily. But Wakasugi-san didn't get mad at all. He seemed to be in sheer agony. I had never seen him like that. My attack against you was really hard on him."

"..."

"He is really emotionally needy. I'm sure you already know that."

I answered, "I know." Sakaguchi for some reason laughed amusingly.

Sakaguchi must have been really bothered by his treatment of me. He was almost beaming with relief as he said, "Good-bye."

I had seriously feared that he would send an anonymous memo or something to my workplace. But now that I see him with such a happy expression, I can't even hate him. Especially because he looks so much like me. Sakaguchi had always been on my mind, so it felt like a lump in my heart had dissolved.

Good. I don't have to worry about anything any longer. Unlike Sakaguchi, I don't have any other options if I lose Wakasugi. I wouldn't be able to truly live without him. He is the only one that means something to me. I'd finally realized

that and I'm not letting go now.

"Noda, there you are." After a while, Wakasugi had come looking for me. With renewed determination, I looked at my dear man closely. My determination must have shown, for Wakasugi smiled at me as if he was seeing something too bright.

"There will be a 'job-well-done' party. I would love you to come if you don't mind, Noda. You are welcome. They are all nice people."

"Okay."

Wakasugi acted surprised. He'd thought that I would decline. He smiled happily and patted my shoulder.

"Really? You're coming? Okay, let's go have a drink together."

In times past, I would have said, "I'll wait for you at your condo," and gone home without him. But things are different now. Since there was no longer any problem with Sakaguchi, I no longer had any reservations. Above all, I want to be with Wakasugi as much as possible, even just a minute or a second more. I don't want us to be apart at all.

"I spoke with Sakaguchi-kun," I told him, whispering. Wakasugi frowned a little.

"What did he say?"

"He said he is devoted to acting. He seemed to be in really good place."

Wakasugi acknowledged this news and smiled. I grinned, too. It felt like everything was falling into an appropriate place.

I will live right beside this man.

"I sent you a book."

When Horikoshi called, I was having a light supper alone. It was a night of lingering summer heat. A performance had gone smoothly. Wakasugi had told me that he was coming home late because he had a meeting tonight about a new project.

"What book?"

A few days ago, Wakasugi and I had invited Horikoshi over for dinner. We've known each other for a long time but this was the first time the three of us had been alone together since the first night I'd met Wakasugi way back when I'd crashed in Horikoshi's apartment. So, it was the first time in ten years. We enjoyed reminiscing about our past. As Horikoshi left, he sincerely said to Wakasugi, "I'm so happy for you." That left a deep impression on me. Horikoshi just listens to what we tell him. He doesn't interrogate any further. He is

wise and more understanding than anyone else I know.

On the phone, Horikoshi said first, "Thanks for the other night." He mentioned the book later. "I sent it by courier, so you'll get it soon. It's Wakasugi's book. I only remembered it when I got home the other day."

"He wrote a book?"

I hazily went over my memories of having searched information about Wakasugi on Internet.

"I think it came out when his troupe first began to be recognized. He published just the one book. It didn't sell well, I guess. Didn't I tell you about it then, Noda? Wakasugi will say, 'Don't show it to Noda.' So don't tell him I sent you this. I sensed that you're eager to know more about Wakasugi, so it's a gift from me."

When we'd had our get together the other day, I had secretly asked Horikoshi, "Do you know anything about Wakasugi's family?" Horikoshi was as close-mouthed as an oyster and didn't say anything at that time. Maybe sending me this book is his belated response to my inquiry.

Everyone, including myself, describes Wakasugi as a 'needy' person. I had asked Horikoshi about Wakasugi's family because I was a little curious about his background. I've never heard Wakasugi speak about it. I had never told him about my family, either. It's not worth mentioning my ordinary, good-willed, pious, and modest parents who only wish their son an ordinary happiness.

The courier delivered the book at almost eight at night. Horikoshi must have specified the delivery time so that I would receive the package after I came home from work. Inside the brown envelope was a hard cover book. The color was a beautiful aqua. It was published five years ago.

The book was an autobiographical novel, depicting the days up to the point where he'd gotten his theater troupe rolling. It was crisply written and very easy to read. The book was probably targeted towards women in their twenties, who were the primary fans of his theater. Although Wakasugi in real life always calls himself '*ore*',¹ the Wakasugi character in the book called himself '*boku*'.² It was sort of a 'Sunday-going-to-a-meeting' kind of Wakasugi. I can now see why Horikoshi said, "Don't tell him I sent you this." Wakasugi may not have wanted me to read this.

The book was basically a life history of the success of the troupe. There wasn't much about his private life. It mentioned a little bit about his love relationships with doubtful credibility. It didn't mention Wakasugi's family or background at all. I flipped over the pages and saw a chapter entitled, "My college years." I stopped flipping and read eagerly.

The chapter began, 'I always thought mostly about my plays during my

college years, just like I do now.'

'... In my private life, I always moved in with the person I fell in love with. I actually crashed at my friends' places as well. Looking back, I think I wanted to create my personal space in the room of any person dear to me. I slept in many places. But the most memorable one belonged to a man whom I met through my buddy. I sponged off him for a few months, but I honestly never could quite understand him.' My eyes were glued to the page. The man he couldn't "quite understand"?

I immediately thought it must be me. But I didn't think Wakasugi would reveal the few months of us living together, including the toughest time in our relationship, in a book relating the background of his troupe. No, he couldn't have written that. Then why did he write it?

I turned the page and read on carefully, word by word. In the book, the man in question is described as a friend. The book didn't say that there was any sexual relationship between them, either.

'That was the first time I had wanted to get along well with someone that I didn't even understand. Precisely because of this, I remember the few months I lived with him so vividly. It's as if I sealed up everything from that time period in my memory, including the smell of the air inside his place. At that time, I was full of self-conceit. I was more than aware that I wouldn't be a compatible friend to him. Yet I thought it would do him good if I stayed near him. I thought, "I can change you," which was laughable notion. But I truly believed it. It was no wonder that I had a bitter experience. Now, I don't say such arrogant things. I don't even think about it. Naturally, people don't change for other people. People can only change for themselves. I wanted him to change, but not for him. For me.'

He went on writing about how he and his friend had to split up due to differences in their ways of thinking at the end. The contents were slightly different from the actual events here and there. But I knew it was written about me once I had read it. Horikoshi must have sent this book to me, thinking the same thing. Didn't Wakasugi know I might somehow see this book? He must have thought about it. And then gone to write this, even knowing I might read it someday.

But I hadn't known about it until now. I hadn't even tried to learn what Wakasugi was thinking or doing up until very recently. I might have heard about this book from Horikoshi during one of those drinking sessions back then. But I had no recollection of it nor would I have been interested.

Once I finished the book, I decided to hide it where Wakasugi wouldn't find

it. I decided to take Horikoshi's advice and not tell Wakasugi that I read it. Though he wasn't sure if I'd ever read it, Wakasugi still wrote words that were directed straight to me. The words penetrated my heart and pained me.

"I wanted him to change. I liked him so much that I couldn't help but want him to change."

"It's nice to see you when I come home, Noda."

I was standing in the kitchen, making dinner, when Wakasugi came to sit at the counter and fixed his gaze upon me. Whenever I feel his gaze while I'm cooking, or lounging on the sofa, I turn around to meet Wakasugi's eyes. And he always murmurs, just like he did now, "It's nice."

I felt a bit embarrassed and lifted the corner of my lips. "You may get sick and tired of me someday. You are clinging to me because you think I'm a mean and evil guy, right? What are you gonna do if I change?"

"Change? How will you change?"

"When I start shouting, 'Wakasugi is mine! Our souls are attracted to each other!' Just like you."

"Inconceivable."

I frowned at his blunt denial. Wakasugi was amused, and he laughed. "But if you become more like me, I'd love it. I love being a cutie pie couple."

"I thought so."

We kept joking and teasing each other. We never got tired of it. I felt pleased with our mundane happiness.

"But why do you like cutie pie couples so much, Wakasugi?"

"Um, I don't know. I've liked that since about forever. That's why dry and emotionless guys like you hate me."

"I don't hate you."

"Never know."

Wakasugi laughed innocently. As I glared at him, my heart went out to seek what could be behind his expression. Most likely, Wakasugi would never tell me how he came to be "needy and romantic."

I'm the same way. I keep most of what's in my mind secret. I don't tell what I'm thinking or how I have lived to anyone. No matter how important that person is to me. Every-body has scars. Very few people can show those scars to others. And still fewer people can be healed.

Everyone goes on with life with the scars at the bottom of their heart. Most people have the scars inside them, which can start bleeding any minute. Yet

they may not even know it. It's nothing unique. The time for Wakasugi and me to look at each other's scars has already come and gone. So I won't ask him what he doesn't want to talk about. I don't want him to know everything about me, either.

I love him very much. That's all I want him to know.

"Wakasugi, could I bring more of my stuff over here? To this place?" I asked as I was serving dishes over the counter. Wakasugi opened his eyes wide as if to say "What?"

"Can I move in? Though I haven't officially submitted my divorce papers yet, nor sold the house, I wanna be with you. Would that be a bother?"

I thought for sure that Wakasugi would be overjoyed, but he didn't respond. His face remained stiff. I started to regret having asked. Maybe I shouldn't have brought it up until divorce became official. Then, Wakasugi asked, "Are you serious?"

I went around the counter and sat next to him on a stool. I wanted to look in his eyes as we talked, but his eyes were staring at his knees grimly.

"If it's better to wait a little longer ..."

"I'm not saying that." Wakasugi immediately cut me off and then smiled a bit ironically.

"I was ... surprised. I didn't think you would initiate this kind of conversation."

"Why not? I won't be able to talk honestly about my true feelings if you keep saying stuff like that. How much longer do I have to hear you say, 'That's not like you, Noda.'?" I spoke resentfully and Wakasugi looked flustered and apologized, "Sorry."

"I didn't mean it that way. I'm sorry."

"My feelings are a little hurt. I thought you'd be happy."

"Sorry." Wakasugi sighed and held me closer. He kissed me on the cheek.

"I am happy. Of course I'm happy. I want to live with you, Noda. We almost live together already, but if you are actually going to move in all the way, I would love it."

"Then, let's do it."

I smiled with a sense of satisfaction. Wakasugi looked away awkwardly. I tilted my head, trying to see what he was looking at.

"Why don't you look at me?"

"Um ... I've been looking at you."

As he said this, Wakasugi looked down as if trying to escape. Wondering about his suspicious behavior, I placed my hand over his hand where it rested

on the counter. We intertwined our fingers and squeezed. Wakasugi blinked slowly. First he looked at our hands, then he shifted his eyes to look at me. Then his gaze returned to our clasped hands.

"I feel embarrassed." As if finally surrendering, Wakasugi smiled shyly, still with downcast eyes. "I feel embarrassed to be like this with you, Noda. My heart is pounding."

"Me, too. My heart is pounding."

I closed my eyes so that I could only feel the warmth of our hands. Wakasugi didn't loosen his grip, either. When I opened my eyes, Wakasugi was still looking at my hand vacantly.

"Is this our first time holding hands like this?"

"Yeah, the first time. When making love sometimes, you hold my hands to pull me closer or to pin me down. But never like this."

"It's in the wrong order, huh?"

"Right. From now on, just by kissing, or just from being next to each other, we may feel abashed," I predicted smugly. Wakasugi burst out laughing.

"You are all in all still a meanie. True to your reputation."

I watched Wakasugi laughing. And my mouth naturally formed a smile.

I'd felt it when Wakasugi was staying at my house after our reunion, too. I found time flowing between us peacefully and pleasantly. It's not that we don't need to have sex, but that the feelings I have when we are not having sex are also dear to me.

When he wants me wildly, I think that passion which hasn't changed from before is sweet. At the same time, I want to gain something that can change form more flexibly. If we stay together like this, that something may grow.

Our laughter subsided and our eyes finally met. Wakasugi eventually leaned closer to me.

"Noda, can I kiss you?"

I closed my eyes in silence.

The fever that touched my lips felt like a stamp from a seal that will never fade.

"It feels as though ... I am touching you for the first time, Noda."

I extended my arms slowly to hold the man I love. Wakasugi cautiously put his arms around my back as if to hold onto something valuable. The moment I was enveloped by his scent and body heat, I saw a soft light under my closed eyelids. I was hoping that this time would keep on flowing slowly. I don't want anything else.

A single phone call put an end to our peaceful days.

I came home from work and was just about to change my clothes when my cell phone rang. The display showed that the call was coming from my wife, Naoko. I'd been wanting to ask her about our divorce papers but I hadn't been able to get hold of her lately. I hurriedly pushed the talk button.

"Noda-san?"

It was a female voice which sounded like Naoko, but it wasn't her.

The screen showed that the call was definitely from Naoko's cell phone. I was confused about who this mystery caller was but managed to answer, "Yes, that's me."

The caller was Naoko's mother.

"Could you come to the hospital?"

For a moment, I didn't know what she meant. As I bent down to write a note, I felt dizzy. My hand was shaking as I took down the name and the address of the hospital.

I rushed to the hospital in a taxi. The lights in the waiting area and an outpatient examination room were already off. Only the emergency center area had a blinding light radiating out of it like an insect zapper.

My mother-in-law was waiting for me at the entrance. She was standing there, biting her lip with a tragic yet determined expression. She explained the situation in a faint voice with a detached tone and without looking at me. According to her account, she'd found Naoko passed out in her room when she went to tell her dinner was ready. Naoko had taken a lot of tranquilizers and sleeping pills. Naoko had been seeing doctors in psychiatric and internal medicine since before our separation. Naoko apparently had stashed away some of her medication. Fortunately, the medicines were all weak dosages and there was no threat to her life. The stomach pump had already been performed. Naoko was already in a regular room in the hospital.

"What floor?" I asked as I immediately started walking towards the elevator.

"You don't need to go," a blunt and firm voice stopped me.

"What do you mean?"

My mother-in-law stepped back, looking scared. She spun away from me and walked towards the deserted hallway meant for outpatients. I followed in haste.

We might have been near the examination room in the pediatrics department. There was a poster in the hallway with a picture of animals and the

slogan, "Gargle and wash your hands for your health." The lights were dim. It was far away from the great turmoil of the emergency department, where patients kept driving up.

My mother-in-law finally turned to me with a grim expression as she reached the end of the hallway.

"Naoko has an important person in her life now. And he's been by her side. Naoko will be only dismayed if you go up there, Noda-san."

Naoko had told me she had "someone she liked." But I didn't think we should discuss it so openly since we were not officially divorced yet. Besides, this subject coming from Naoko is one thing. Coming from her mother was totally another. I was naturally puzzled. Why? There had to be some reason why my mother-in-law was being so rude.

"Why did Naoko take all those drugs?"

"I don't think she tried to kill herself. I don't think she even had room in her head to think about suicide. It was just such a shocking for her ... That's why she took so many pills ... 'I didn't mean to do this,' Naoko apologized to us right after she woke here."

My mother-in-law's speech was ragged and I could see in her tear-filled eyes that there was some flaming feeling she wanted to spit out at me. Her aged face was looking at me with a piercing gaze.

Is this because of our divorce? But if Naoko has a new boyfriend ... The more I thought about it, the more confused I got. I waited for her explanation without being able to say anything. But my mother-in-law was slow in her manner of speech. The silence accompanied by an accusatory gaze dragged on painfully.

"Why did you marry our daughter?" When the words were finally squeezed out of my mother-in-law's mouth, that pierced my soul. I instantly knew what she was so furious about.

My mother-in-law took out an envelope, which presumably held some documents, out of the tote bag in her hand and threw it at me. The envelope hit my chest and fell to the floor with a thud. The envelope was unsealed and several pictures fell out from the impact. Seeing these pictures, I gasped.

Apparently, the pictures had been taken secretly. They were all pictures of Wakasugi and me. There were pictures of us walking together, including one of us going to a nearby convenience store. Then I saw the picture of us coming home from a restaurant—the moment of our wide-open kiss was captured in an angle, which wouldn't allow any misinterpretation.

"Naoko told me. You care about your public image. So you might not agree

to a divorce even if you didn't have any real feelings for her. ... Then she said, 'It was so easy and anticlimactic. I told him that there was already someone else I liked. But he didn't even get jealous.' So she wanted to know if you had someone else too. Even though she was determined to get divorced, you can imagine how shocking it was for her to see this report, can't you? You have no idea how much she suffered. You couldn't ... possibly have loved Naoko even at the very beginning."

I picked up the envelope and the pictures. The document inside bore the header "Investigative Report."

When Wakasugi said that he'd felt that someone was following him, it wasn't the mass media or Sakaguchi's friend, but a detective that Naoko had hired.

"Why did you marry our daughter?" my mother-in-law repeated the same question.

Mother-in-law's face overlapped in my mind with my mother's face, who was always watching me with a concerned look. My mother had been so happy when I'd decided to get married, but she had also looked apprehensive. When I told her about the divorce, she simply said, "I see," and lowered her head without asking any further questions. If someone had done the same thing to me, my mother would glare at that person, who had hurt her precious child, just like my mother-in-law was doing. Thinking about this, I couldn't find any words to make a futile excuse.

"Can I see Naoko? I want to see her."

"You don't need to see her. Please don't upset her any more than she already is."

"But I ..."

I wanted to explain my situation and apologize for the damage I had caused. I had never meant to hurt Naoko. I had really wanted to build an ordinary, happy family life when I got married. It wasn't like just anybody would do. I thought I could make myself do all that if Naoko was the one to be my wife. Then again, that explanation may only be a self-justification.

My mother-in-law must have gotten tired of glaring. Her face suddenly softened.

"Do your parents know? What about people at your work? They don't know, do they?"

I looked at my mother-in-law closely. She had a frozen serious face but she wasn't glaring at me any more. She looked away, her eyes teary, and then murmured in a chagrined tone, "I couldn't stand if it was Naoko was the only one

who got hurt."

Fortunately, when I returned to the condo, Wakasugi wasn't home yet. On my way home in a taxi, my mind had been empty, not working at all. My mind was still in a fog as I sank down onto the sofa. Occasionally, images of my mother-in-law, my mother, and Naoko as I'd last seen her flashed through my brain. These images just floated around in the air.

Before I knew it, more than an hour had passed. The hands on the clock were pointing to eleven o'clock. I finally got up, went over to the kitchen and drank some water. I returned to the sofa in the living room and looked at the envelope thrown at me by my mother-in-law. How would I explain all this to Wakasugi?

Before I could put my thoughts together, I heard the entrance door open. I instinctively hid the envelope I was holding under some magazines on the table.

"Welcome home," I said with a slightly cracked voice as I got up to greet him. He entered the living room and looked at me saying, "I'm home," with a smile.

As soon as I saw his smile, I choked up. Wakasugi made an expression as to ask me, "What's wrong?" I shook my head in return meaning, "Nothing," but I couldn't help the cold sweat forming on my forehead.

Wakasugi took out a pitcher of water from the refrigerator, poured some into a glass and put his lips to it. Putting his chin up to quench his thirst, his eyes were looking right at me. As usual, he looked at me as if he were examining my whole body. I used to feel happy about that look because I took it as a sign of his attachment to me. But I felt like running away tonight. I was afraid that he would see through me.

"Noda, when are you finally moving in here?"

At his question, I froze.

"I want you to move in soon. Otherwise, I'm afraid that you may change your mind again. Or do you already know that and are teasing me on purpose?"

"... Kind of."

I smiled vaguely. Wakasugi quickly walked over to me. Saying, "You, rascal," he jabbed at my head and put his hands over my shoulders.

Held in his arms, my eyes kept being drawn to the report I had hidden under the magazines. I need to tell him, I thought. But I couldn't speak. From Wakasugi's point of view, everything had been settled when I told him I was moving in. Wakasugi was completely relaxed and smiling whenever he saw me

here now. I couldn't make myself crush his peace in mind.

Naoko had taken an overdose of medications on a sudden impulse. That would be the least sort of thing Wakasugi would want to hear. I pushed his body away, feeling stifled.

"Do you wanna eat something? I can fix it."

"Yeah, a little."

"Why don't you take a bath first?"

It was difficult for me to look him in the face. So I pushed on his back, urging him on, "There."

I watched his back as Wakasugi made his way to the bathroom. Left alone, I stood there with my eyes fixed on the envelope under the magazines. The heavy lump that had sunk to the bottom of my heart didn't go away while I was cooking in the kitchen. I didn't know how or what to tell him. Should I tell him that our relationship had pushed Naoko to the edge? After Wakasugi got out of the bath, I was still standing in the kitchen. He hugged me from behind as if babying me. As soon as I felt his wet and warm skin, I almost lost control.

Wakasugi moved his lips from the back of my head to my ear. It was a soft, healing kiss.

I fought back tears.

I want to scream.

I imagined myself screaming, crying, and ranting. But, actually, I couldn't make a single sound.

Wakasugi held me tighter. It was as if he knew I was holding back the urge to cry and scream.

"Noda ..."

He sucked on my neck hard. His hand caressed my chest all over in search of the sensitive parts of my chest through shirt. I grabbed him by the fingertips and forced myself to form a smile. A smile was about to get twisted. Then I turned around.

"Hey, you're eating, aren't you? I cooked these for you."

"I want to eat you first, Noda. Can I?"

"Cut it out. How old do you think you are? Behave yourself and eat."

Wakasugi replied, "Okay, okay," sitting down at the table obediently and starting to pick at the dishes I brought. I could see a little bit of fatigue under his eyes, but his expression was soft and relaxed.

He had no doubt that I was moving in here. I started to feel the pain in my chest while seeing Wakasugi at complete ease.

I stood by him and leaned down to kiss him. Wakasugi looked up at me,

squirming all the while.

"I thought that was bad manners."

"It's okay if I do it 'cause I'm not eating."

Wakasugi looked up so that it was easier for me to kiss him. I pressed my lips on his again. I couldn't say anything. I couldn't help but keep touching him. I was too worried.

"Wakasugi, what would you do if I became impotent?"

If we can't make love to each other any more ... If we can't keep living with the same small distance between us we have now ...

Would Wakasugi and I still have any reason to be together?

Wakasugi had told me about "finding each other and becoming attracted to each other in the void." I thought it was generally agreed that matter exists, so I thought the world Wakasugi described was imaginary. But now I find myself yearning to discover that imaginary world.

"What is it? All of a sudden."

Wakasugi's sweet expression turned serious, trying to figure out my true intentions.

I thought about telling him, but I didn't know where to start. I shook my head, sat down next to him, and pressed my forehead against his shoulder.

If we can't make love any more ...? If we can't touch each other any more ...? If you are not with me any more ...?

"A little bit ... tired. It's about work ..."

"You mean, you're worried you may become impotent because of stress?" He sounded relieved, smiling.

Whenever I mention work as an excuse, Wakasugi doesn't pursue any further. He knows that I sometimes have to complain.

"Yeah ... I had a hard time at work." As I whispered, I felt so depressed that what I had built could be so instantly demolished. I still thought I would be okay as long as I had this warmth embracing me. But my news could possibly hurt the source of the fever.

I could be long way off from moving in.

Naoko was shocked to find out about our relationship and took some pills

...

I started to open my mouth several times to tell him but I couldn't utter the sounds.

Wakasugi offered to clean up, but I chased him away to the bedroom saying, "I'll do it." Alone in the kitchen washing dishes, I couldn't help sobbing. I squatted down on the spot.

This was the first time I had cried since childhood. I didn't know how to cry. I just let the tears roll down my cheeks to my chin while struggling to keep quiet. When I had no more tears left, my confusion had somehow subsided. A sense of quiet and tranquillity came over me.

I wasn't regretful or ashamed of my relationship with Wakasugi. But the fact was that I had ended up hurting Naoko. There was no excuse for that. No matter how hard I might try to explain that I hadn't mean for any of this to happen when I married Naoko, it was meaningless. The results were the same.

Naoko took some pills ... I was afraid to tell Wakasugi. I couldn't stand to hurt him. I wanted to vanish. Suddenly, the world around me disappeared. I could only see a pitch black darkness. The only thing there was for me to do was fall down into that darkness. In the darkness, there's no reason, no thought, no judgement. I got up and opened the drawer of the kitchen cupboard. I saw a dull glint in the darkness. As if entranced by the light coming off the blade, I reached for it. A reality that had seemed so far away from me was now approaching. *This is pathetic. This is merely another escape.*

You decided not to run away any more. You decided not to waver whatever may happen. When did I make that my resolve? As I searched my memory, I stopped moving as if hit by lightning. I had made up my mind on the night that I became convinced that I couldn't possibly break up with Wakasugi.

"I want you to live. Live beside me." I heard Wakasugi's voice echoing in the depths of my ears once more. Tears rolled down my cheeks, a different kind of tears from the last ones.

When I entered the bedroom, Wakasugi was in bed with his eyes closed. But he wasn't asleep. The moment he sensed my entry, he immediately turned to me.

"You're late. I was getting worried."

"I took a shower ... after doing the dishes."

Since I didn't have a change of clothes, I had only a bath towel around my body. I was about to change into pyjamas when Wakasugi called impatiently, "Come over here."

I went over to the bed. Wakasugi readily stretched his arms out and pulled me into bed.

My eyes might have still been a little red because of the crying that I'd done earlier. But Wakasugi wouldn't notice in the dim light. With the ceiling light off, the room was filled only with the soft warm light coming from the bedside

lamp.

"You should be sleeping."

Wakasugi frowned. Maybe he took it as a sign of a rejection.

"You don't wanna do it?"

"It's not that. I wanted to see your sleeping face, Wakasugi."

"Why would you wanna see that?"

Wakasugi laughed out loud amusingly and held me close. Touched by his warmth, the pitch black darkness, that was visible only in my head, quickly moved off. That darkness that you could never crawl out of once it was embraced was right there within my reach. But I shouldn't go there.

I checked my heartbeat. It was beating normally.

"I have ... changed," I muttered and Wakasugi expressed his puzzlement, "What?" I shook my head and smiled, "Nothing."

Before, I would have thought that I should go ahead and bury my heart in the darkness forever. I would have thought that because I was too worried that I might hurt someone. Be-cause I wanted to escape without atonement. Because I was too scared that people might laugh at me. Because I didn't want to see my parents feel completely sad.

Escaping from all of that was the only solution I could think of before. But there is no escape for me any more, for I have heard Wakasugi's voice. He's told me that he wanted me to live beside him, so I will live no matter how much I suffer, and no matter what the consequences are.

My parents will hear about this. My in-laws will demand that my parents take responsibility for their evil son, who hurt their daughter so grievously. My company will also hear about what has happened in no time. I first met Naoko at the after party for one of my co-workers' wedding. If Naoko talks about this with her friend, the rumors will spread like wildfire. Co-workers will most likely have been gossiping about me already anyway. They've probably been saying behind my back, "Although Noda has only just built their house, his wife has left him." That can't be helped. Naoko herself probably doesn't want to see me, so I'll have to make it up to her however I can.

In order to live, I have to accept all these consequences. I would be lying if I said I'm not worried about the future. But I should be able to make it. No matter what I lose, I will not be scared any more. No matter what, except for one thing. As long as I have Wakasugi with me, I won't need anything else.

"Wakasugi," I sat up and looked down into his face from directly above. "I love you."

My voice was stiff, as if this was the first time I had ever confessed my

feelings. I slowly leaned in and pressed my lips to his. I thought that the fever that touched me was a testament of our emotional contract, which states that I will continue to live on beside him.

When our lips came apart, Wakasugi looked at me quizzically and laid his hand against my cheek.

"What is it?"

I was about to open my mouth and then I swallowed the words. I wanted to tell him how I felt first before telling him what had happened.

"You always tell me I'm a cold-hearted person. But I love you so much more than you think."

Wakasugi's eyes widened and his lips slightly curved upwards.

"What's going on? Why are you saying what I've always wanted to hear all of a sudden? Am I dreaming or what?"

"I'm serious."

It's not like you, he must be thinking. I looked down, fighting a bitter smile. I sensed his eyes looking at me. I looked up and my eyes met Wakasugi's. He reached his hand out to cup my chin as he smiled somewhat tautly.

"... That makes me happy."

Wakasugi cradled my cheeks with his hands and pulled me closer. His lips were hot and moist as they covered mine.

"Ahh ..."

His thrusting tongue voraciously pillaged my mouth. The flesh connection transmitted his hunger and my sensitive nerves trembled. My mouth was forced open and I took his tongue in deeply. Our breaths were blended with our kisses.

"That makes me happy," Wakasugi repeated one more time.

His face looked somewhat tense. I realized for the first time that it was because he was trying to suppress his excitement. What I said to him had given him an unusual surge of adrenaline for sure.

Wakasugi stroked my ear gently and kissed me on the lips again and again. I was sure he was ready for more explicit action, but he kept caressing my mouth with the tip of his tongue. It was as if he was a jet plane enjoying the run up before take off. His kisses were tenacious and I felt as though my soul was being sucked out of my body, just as I had when we were younger.

More, more. There was nothing deeper, but Wakasugi invaded my mouth further. The hardened evidence of his lust rubbed against my body, demanding all of me. Wakasugi peeled the bath towel off my body and kissed my bare skin. I was so sensitive that even a slight touch of his fingers on my skin made

my back arch. I had to stifle a moan. Even the touch of the cool sheets made my thighs twitch.

I felt so vulnerable. I thought my emotions would overflow and I'd start crying again.

It was a great joy to know that he literally meant everything to me, but it caused fear at the same time. In his arms, I trembled slightly as if I were still a virgin.

"... You are so adorable today, Noda. What's going on?"

He was smiling about my overly sensitive reactions while he licked my chest. I shook my head as if I was to say, "No."

"This adorable you is good. This is all new to me."

Wakasugi took his time to kiss my skin and to part my legs. He then inserted first one finger, then two, into my hole. He found my prostate, and I couldn't help but moan incessantly out loud, "Yes." "You are seducing me by telling me you love me so much," He teased in a stern tone while licking my earlobe. The moment our eyes met, I glared at him.

"That's right. I love you."

Wakasugi instantly looked flustered. I watched his mouth and whispered, "I told you already. I love you so much, Wakasugi. I really love you."

Wakasugi stopped moving and looked at me closely. Just as before, his eyes looked somewhat tense.

"Yes, you've told me."

After he murmured his acknowledgement, Wakasugi crawled on top of me and eagerly and greedily covered my mouth with his. His sticky tongue licked all the inside of my mouth, as if tasting something especially sweet. Wakasugi was so absorbed that he looked like a beast. He whispered in a cracked voice with an urgent tone, "Noda. Noda." Each time I heard his voice calling me, I felt an electrifying tingling sensation in my spine.

Wakasugi became extremely excited and happy, losing himself, just from hearing me say, "I love you." Wakasugi was a treasure to me. I wanted to offer him everything I could possibly give. I vigorously returned his kisses.

Everything began melting, starting with the places we were touching. Just kissing each other ignited a fire within my body. No matter how much I gave him, Wakasugi wanted more. He was so absorbed in sucking my lips, that I had to chuckle with a sigh when our lips came apart.

"You're so needy."

I had said this in my mind many times before, but this was the first time I'd ever said it out loud. Wakasugi mischievously curled up the corner of his lips

and started sucking my neck softly. He confessed, "Yes, I am," as he left the mark of his love on my skin.

"So, don't leave me alone."

When his sweet and somewhat melancholic eyes looked up at me, I felt completely bound by invisible chains. And I loved my bonds.

"I'll be with you," I whispered to him, stating my determination. With or without knowing my full mind, Wakasugi smiled.

It seemed he was unable to contain himself any longer. He rubbed his already engorged cock against my abdomen. His eyes looked at me tenderly yet they also conveyed a terrible urgency.

"Noda, tell me that you want me."

I obliged his request and he lifted me by the waist and buried his throbbing erection deep within me. I lurched and took a deep breath, just as Wakasugi's mouth covered mine, as if to block any escape. In search of salvation, I clutched his back and dug my nails into his skin. Wakasugi looked into my face and kissed my lips softly this time.

"Do you really love me?"

His cock stabbed me deeply and I gave a breathless moan.

"... I love you." The sound vibrated its way to my heart and dissipated into a sigh.

Wakasugi usually whispered sweet nothings, but he didn't immediately reply with "I love you, too" that night. Instead, he gazed at me, his eyes hot and wet. As if it was speaking for his silent lips, Wakasugi rammed his cock into me over and over again. I begged him to slow down but he couldn't stop his wild motions.

"Noda ..."

From time to time, my name slipped out from his lips like he couldn't hold it in. He brought me to the heights so many times that I didn't even know where I was wandering any more.

My consciousness had been blown away like leaves in the wind, but I wasn't scared because the force piercing my body was a powerful reassurance that I was firmly connected. I thought about our lovemaking for the first time. I felt like I was falling, except that our fingers were tightly clasped.

Nothing had changed from the very beginning. When I thought about this, his fever that hid inside me became so much dearer. I panted harder. Wakasugi said he could find me even in the void. If the fever inside me vanishes, I'll still have the memory of it. In the past, I used to have fragments of emotions, that I couldn't even call feelings. Looking back, they have now all been transformed

into invaluable memories. I didn't know it then, but I guess there are many things which can only be understood in hindsight. The fever, which I thought was meaningless, now leads me, like a route marker.

After delaying his orgasm for so long, he finally came deep inside of me, shooting his load like hot lava. Wakasugi murmured at last, breathless, "I love you."

I smiled, almost crying. Wakasugi collapsed onto me. I whispered in his ear, "I love you, too."

Even in that void, I could also find you.

I escaped from Wakasugi's arms by telling him I was thirsty. I left the bedroom, went through the darkened living room, and opened the refrigerator in the kitchen. I quenched my thirst with water, and sat down on the sofa in the living room. I pondered awhile, holding my head.

I still have the remnants of Wakasugi's wet heat inside me. Even alone, it felt like I was being held tightly. This feeling almost made me shudder, but I managed to suppress it. *This is just a tremor of excitement*, I told myself.

I decided that I'll be with him no matter what may happen.

Let's get through this together, I thought.

I made up my mind to tell Wakasugi about Naoko. I picked up the envelope containing the investigative report before returning to the bedroom.

"Wakasugi ..."

I opened the door to the bedroom, and said, "I want to talk to you." But there was no reply. I looked over to the bed and saw Wakasugi lying down almost with his eyes closed. I thought he might wake up immediately at the sign of my presence, as he had done earlier. But when I got closer, I saw that his eyes remained closed. I could even hear his breathing through his half-open mouth. He was in a deep sleep. I stood there with the envelope in my hand. *He never goes to sleep before I do. But now he is asleep right beside me.* I forgot about everything that had happened today. I forgot about anything that might happen tomorrow. I simply paid rapt attention to his sleeping face.

His fine-featured face, with his eyes closed and corner of lips slightly up, looked like it was smiling. I sat down on the bed softly. Wakasugi must have felt the vibration, because he quickly looked up, alarmed. When our eyes met, he smiled shyly.

"Oh. I was asleep."



As I sat down, I hid the envelope under the bed so that Wakasugi wouldn't see it.

"I'm sorry. I woke you up. Go on back to sleep."

I didn't want to destroy this moment. I could talk to him tomorrow. I wanted him to sleep peacefully beside me. Just for tonight. I will probably torment him and rip his heart apart again someday, so just for now ...

I embraced each passing second as if it were something fragile. If there is a God, I wanted him to look the other way, just for now. I reached out to close his eyes again. Wakasugi giggled. He pulled my arm and hugged me as if to say, "Let's sleep together." I submissively let him and sank down into the bed. Wakasugi held me like he would a pillow, and kissed me on my forehead. "Good night," he whispered with a sigh. "Good night," I replied. Then Wakasugi closed his eyes as if completely reassured. After awhile, I heard the sound of quiet breathing through his lips. I relaxed my shoulders and smiled.

His sleeping face looked so peaceful. I really wanted time to stop. I could sense more and more of our idyllic peace and quiet, so long reached for and only recently attained, slipping through my finger tips and dissipating as each second passed.

I feel lonely. I could admit this to myself for the first time. The important things in life are precious, sometimes scary, and often they have to be faced alone. I used to think it is only natural to be lonely. But that natural state is now unbearable to me. Precisely because loneliness lurks, love is all the more dear.

It seemed like Wakasugi was in a deep slumber. No matter how hard I stared at him, he didn't show any signs of waking up. I closed my eyes to follow him. Slowly falling asleep, I was surrounded by innumerable dream bubbles, which came floating up from the bottom of my consciousness. He'd told me that he would still be able find me, even in the void. I sensed Wakasugi's presence looking for me even as I dreamed. So I looked for him, trying to catch up as I had something to tell him.

Don't worry. I'm here. I'll always be with you.

POSTSCRIPT RIO SUGIHARA

Hello, I'm Rio Sugihara. Thank you so much for choosing my book, "37°C."

"37°C" is a story I originally wrote for a *dojinshi*. I really liked the mood of this story, so I am delighted to publish it as a novel this time. I touched up the existing story and wrote chapter three.

Now that I've put it all together as a book, the finished product comes closer to what I had initially pictured in my head. I am very satisfied with the outcome.

Now, I would like to thank some of the people who have supported me in this endeavor. For the illustrations, I have to thank Akeno Kitahata for taking on this task. Although I have seen only rough sketches, I have always been a big fan of hers for the serene and delicate spaces she depicts. Many thanks to Akeno Kitahata for making time in her busy schedule.

I would also like to thank the publisher. Thank you for giving me this opportunity. I feel like I have been nothing but trouble from the start. I appreciate your past and future support.

And to you, my readers, I am grateful that you took the time to read my novel.

It has been a long time since I last published a novel. I was quite worried if "anyone would pick it up," while working on this project. Although it caused me to lose sleep, I enjoyed writing this story.

If you could, please send me feedback.

This is one of my favorites. I hope it will become one of your favorites, too.

Rio Sugihara

1. A somewhat coarse term for the pronoun "I", used by adult males.
2. * An informal term for the pronoun "I", casually used by males ranging from children to the elderly.

Noda has never wanted to be a source of disappointment or shame to his family. Raised in a pious, conservative household, he knew he had certain expectations to meet. Get a job, find a wife, have children—these were to be his destiny. But Noda has a secret. Ten years ago, he had a torrid sexual affair with an acquaintance, a male acquaintance. Noda had kept himself from getting to know Wakasugi too well, hoping to distance himself from emotional entanglements. After all, it had to end sometime. Two men couldn't carry on a forever type of relationship. When it got too personal, Noda pushed Wakasugi out of his life.

Now, Noda is all alone in his newly built house. His wife has left him, and they've had no children together. Then came the unexpected phone call from Wakasugi. Feelings buried for ten long years were given an opportunity to be laid to rest. But the outcome was not as either man expected, as passions that had simmered for ten long, lonely years insist upon a reckoning. Is Wakasugi ready to risk his heart again, and can Noda find the courage to step out of the closet he has locked himself and his emotions into? Two hearts reach across time and emotional distance to feed the fever that burns...

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